FLESH
A NOVEL
DAVID SZALAY
AUTHOR OF BOOKER PRIZE FINALIST ALL THAT MAN IS

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FLESH

A NOVEL

DAVID SZALAY

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WHEN HE'S FIFTEEN, he and his mother move to a new town and he starts at a new school. It's not an easy age to do that—the social order of the school is already well established and he has some difficulty making friends. After a while he does make one friend, another solitary individual. They sometimes hang out together after school in the new Western-style shopping mall that has just opened in the town.

"Have you ever done it?" his friend asks him.

"No," István says.

"Me neither," his friend says, making the admission seem easy somehow. He has a simple and natural way of talking about sex. He tells István which girls at school he fantasizes about, and what he fantasizes about doing to them. He says that he often masturbates four or five times a day, which makes István feel inadequate since he usually only does it once or twice. When he admits that, his friend says, "You must have a weak sex drive."

It may be true, for all he knows.

He doesn't know what it's like for other people.

He only has his own experience.

One day his friend tells him that he did it with a girl who lives on the other side of the train tracks.

The news is disorienting.

István listens while his friend describes, in some detail, what happened. He tries to work out if his friend is telling the truth or if he's lying. Though he would prefer him to be lying, he thinks that he's probably telling the truth. Some of the things he says seem too specific, too surprising, for him to have made them up.

Then, a few days later, he says he talked to the girl and she said she'd do it with István as well.

"Seriously?" István says.

"Yeah," his friend says.

István doesn't know if this means that the three of them will do it together, or just that he'll do it with the girl on his own.

He is too unsure of himself to ask.

After school the same day, they walk across the footbridge over the train tracks.

It's already getting dark.

They go down the metal steps on the other side of the footbridge and walk for a while until they arrive at a housing estate. It's not dissimilar to the one where István and his mother live, only here the buildings, although also made of prefabricated concrete panels, are taller. At the entrance of one of them his friend keys in the doorbell number of one of the apartments.

A few moments later, without anything being said, the door unlocks and he shoulders through it.

The elevator smells of cigarette smoke.

István stares at the wood-effect Formica of its interior as it goes up.

It goes up very slowly, with a continuous creaking and a separate loud ticking sound as it passes each floor.

"You okay?" his friend asks him.

"Yeah," István says.

"You look terrified," his friend says.

"No," István says.

They leave the elevator at one of the upper floors and his friend knocks on the door of an apartment. It's opened by a girl of about their own age. "Hi," she says.

"Hi," István's friend says.

She stands aside for them to step into the entrance hall.

"This is my friend," István's friend says. "You know. The one I told you about."

"Okay," the girl says.

She and István look at each other for a moment.

"Okay?" István's friend says.

"Yeah," the girl says.

The three of them just stand there.

The girl looks at István again.

He doesn't look at her.

"Okay," István's friend says.

"D'you want to wait in there?" the girl says to him, indicating a door.

"Yeah, okay," István's friend says. It's possible that he seems disappointed, as if maybe he wasn't sure himself whether or not they

were going to do it all together, and had been sort of hoping that they would be.

István is lighting a cigarette, having to work the lighter a few times to get a flame.

His friend makes eye contact with him for a second and smiles.

István doesn't even try to smile back. He feels something almost like panic.

He follows the girl along a short dark corridor and into a room at the end of it.

He doesn't really take this room in, except that there's a lot of stuff in it, including what seems to be a small animal in a cage.

The girl sits down on a bed that's there.

István sits on a chair.

"What's your name again?" the girl asks him.

He tells her.

She tells him her name.

"You all right?" she says.

"Yes," he says.

They talk for a few minutes. She talks anyway. There are also long silences, during which the sound of the small animal moving in its cage is sometimes audible. She asks him where he's from.

"What's that like?" she asks when he tells her.

"It's okay," he says.

They sit there in silence.

She lights a cigarette, maybe just to do something.

After a while, without saying anything, she stands up and leaves.

A few minutes later the door opens again.

István looks up and sees his friend.

He expected it to be the girl.

"What happened?" his friend asks.

"What do you mean?"

"What happened?" his friend asks again.

"Nothing."

"She wants you to leave," his friend says. "What did you do?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing?"

"Yeah."

They leave the apartment and in the corridor outside his friend says, "Okay then, see you."

"Aren't you coming?" István asks him.

"No, she wants me to go back," his friend says.

"Yeah?"

His friend nods. "See you around."

"Okay."

Still not understanding what happened, István takes the elevator down on his own.

"She said you weren't sexy. That's what she said." It's a few days later and his friend is explaining it to him, what happened.

István smokes.

It's horrible, to have that said to him, and about him, and yet he doesn't know what to say in answer to it. It seems unanswerable.

"She said you didn't seem up for it," his friend says.

"I was up for it," István says.

"She said you didn't seem to be."

"I was."

After that things aren't the same with his friend.

They spend less time together.

His friend starts to hang out with other people.

István spends more time on his own.

On Sunday he and his mother visit his grandmother. It's her birthday. He sits there, bored, in her living room while she and his mother talk.

His mother asks him to fill a vase with water for the flowers they brought.

He goes to the kitchen and does that.

The windows are open. It's a warm day for the time of year.

"And how are you?" his grandmother asks him.

"I'm okay," he says.

He stands on the small balcony wishing he could smoke.

In the distance, and farther down the hill, he can see the part of the town where he and his mother live.

His mother is telling his grandmother how well he's doing at school.

His grandmother takes some money from her wallet and gives it to him, apparently as a sort of reward.

His mother tells him to say thank you.

"Thank you," he says.

His grandmother smiles.

She has these travel books. They're lined up next to one another on a shelf near the TV. Italy, France, Czechoslovakia, the USSR, West Germany, Great Britain. Out of boredom he looks at them while his mother and his grandmother talk. The books have pictures in them, mostly black-and-white, and a few color ones too. The colors in them look unnatural somehow, they don't look like the colors of things in reality.

There's a lady who lives in the apartment opposite them. Soon after István and his mother moved into the building, the lady asked his mother if István would be able to help her with the shopping sometimes.

"What does that mean?" István said when his mother told him about it.

"She wants you to go to the shop with her and help her to carry the stuff upstairs."

"I don't want to do that," he said.

"She's been very helpful to us," his mother said.

"I'm not doing it," he said.

"I told her you would," his mother said.

"You said I'd do it?"

"Yes, I did."

"Why?"

"She's been very helpful to us," his mother said again. "And her husband has some sort of heart problem. I'm not going to argue with you about this."

Since then, once or twice a week, he goes to the supermarket with the lady and helps her to carry the shopping home.

After arriving home from school he drops his backpack on the floor of the apartment and then leaves again and knocks on the door of the apartment opposite.

It's opened by the lady who lives there and she tells him to wait a minute, which he does, with his hood up and his headphones on, looking down the first flight of stairs to the half-landing, where there's a line of plants in pots on the floor next to the window. The window is set oddly low in the wall. In fact it extends below the level of the floor.

"Okay," the lady says, locking the door of her own apartment.

She has her coat and hat on now and they start down the concrete stairs together.

"Is it cold out?" she asks him as they walk down the stairs.

He has to lift the headphones from his ears to hear her.

"Is it cold out?" she says again.

"Yeah," he says.

They pick their way among the puddles on the uneven sidewalk and wait at the traffic lights.

It seems very light inside the supermarket after the wintry darkness of the street.

The lady frees her hair from her hat and loosens her scarf.

He follows her around pushing the cart while she puts things into it.

They don't speak.

Afterward they walk back to the building where they live, and up the stairs. There's no elevator in the building and their apartments are on the fourth floor.

"You're very strong," she says to him as he puts the heavy stuff down on her kitchen table.

He doesn't know what to say to that.

He just nods, and she asks him if he wants some *Somloi galuska*. Sometimes when they get back she offers him something to eat, something sweet like *Somloi galuska*.

"Yeah, okay," he says.

"Sit down, then," she says.

He sits at the table.

The *Somloi galuska* is in the fridge, and she serves a large helping into a glass bowl and puts it in front of him, with a spoon.

"Thanks," he says.

While he eats it she puts the groceries away.

He's becoming aware that she feels a sort of affection for him, or something. It embarrasses him, and he also quite likes it in a way, even though he doesn't feel any affection for her.

He doesn't feel anything for her.

She's just this old woman, maybe even older than his mother.

It's like she hardly exists.

"How is it?" she asks, putting things away.

"It's nice," he says.

He eats it quickly, partly because it's delicious and partly because he wants to be out of there as soon as possible.

When he has finished it he stands up, making the chair scrape loudly on the floor.

"Okay, then," he says.

"Can I kiss you?" she says.

She's standing in front of him.

The question is so surprising that he doesn't know what to say.

He doesn't even know what she means really.

When he doesn't say anything she kisses him on the lips. It's nothing—her lips just lightly touch his for a moment.

"I'm sorry," she says immediately afterward.

He just stands there.

"I think you should go now," she says.

Still without saying anything he leaves and walks across the landing and lets himself into his mother's apartment.

The lights are on in the classroom, fluorescent lights on the ceiling in translucent plastic boxes. The boxes contain a fair number of dead flies—blurred little shapes that he sometimes stares at while the teacher speaks. Only a few people are even pretending to listen to the teacher, who's reading aloud from a book. "In broad terms, individuals that are more 'fit' have better potential for survival. However, modern evolutionary theory defines fitness not by how long an organism lives, but by how successful it is at reproducing. If an organism lives half as long as others of its species, but has twice as many offspring surviving to adulthood, its genes become more common in the adult population of the next generation." It's the last lesson of the afternoon.

Afterward he walks home.

He's taking the stairs two at a time when suddenly she's there, in front of him, holding a small plastic watering can. She's watering the plants on the half-landing between the floors. He hasn't seen her since the last time they went to the supermarket together, when they kissed afterward. "Hello, István," she says without stopping what she's doing.

"Hello," he says.

He just stands there a few steps down from her, still panting slightly. To see her again makes it even stranger to think that he actually *kissed* her.

She asks him if he can come to the supermarket with her.

"Okay," he says.

As usual, they don't speak to each other while they do the shopping.

It's only when they're back in her apartment that she says, "I'm sorry about what happened the other day."

It surprises him that she should say that. It makes it sound like she did something *to* him, whereas the way he's been thinking about it, it was something that they did together.

"It's okay," he says.

"Is it?" she asks.

He's not sure what he's supposed to say.

He doesn't say anything.

"Did you tell anyone?" she asks him.

"No," he says.

He hasn't told anyone. He has no one to tell. And even if he did, what would he tell them? That he'd kissed someone old and ugly like her?

The next time they get back from the supermarket and she asks him if he wants some *Somloi galuska*, he hesitates and then says, "Yeah, okay."

She tells him to sit down and puts a bowl of it in front of him, with a spoon and a folded paper napkin.

"Thanks," he says.

While he eats it she puts the groceries away.

He has just stood up from the table and is wiping his mouth with the paper napkin when she says, "Can I?"

It's obvious what she means.

"Okay," he says, after a few seconds. He doesn't know why he says that. Some part of him seems to want to.

Her lips lightly touch his for a moment, just like the first time.

"Thank you," she says, not looking at him.

"That's okay," he says.

Still not looking at him, she waits for him to leave.

When he understands that that's what she's waiting for, he walks across the landing and lets himself into his mother's apartment.

After that they kiss every time. It becomes part of what they do when they go to the supermarket. She offers him something to eat, and then she lightly touches her lips to his for a moment, and then he leaves.

One day she suggests that they sit on the sofa.

He has never been in her living room. He doesn't really take it in, except that there's a balcony at one end, like there is in his mother's apartment, with a balustrade made of panels of green safety glass.

They sit on the sofa.

"Have you ever kissed anyone properly?" she asks.

Embarrassed that the answer is no, he pretends not to be sure what she means. He doesn't say anything anyway.

"Do you want to kiss me properly?" she asks.

"All right," he says.

His heart is unexpectedly thumping.

"Yeah?" she says.

He just nods.

He can hear a clock ticking.

She touches her lips to his, like she's done in the kitchen a few times, only now she keeps them there, and presses them more strongly against his.

Something about the angle at which they're turned to each other is awkward and they shift their positions slightly.

She moves her lips to his again, and this time she opens her mouth and he feels her tongue on his lips and then opens his own mouth and her tongue goes into it.

He shuts his eyes so that he doesn't have to see her, so that he only feels her lips, and her tongue inside his mouth.

"Was that nice?" she says.

He nods.

"Do you want to do it again?" she asks.

"Okay," he says.

They do it again and while they're doing it one of her hands brushes against his erection, which is pushing out the fabric of his trousers.

He was hardly aware of it himself until her hand accidentally brushed against it.

As soon as that happens, he feels her tense up.

Embarrassed, he pulls away from her.

"What is it?" she says, trying to take his hand.

He's already on his feet.

"What is it?" she says again. "It's okay."

It's not okay, he thinks, looking down at her.

She disgusts him. Without saying anything else, he leaves.

He goes down the stairs and out of the building and walks around for almost an hour without really knowing where he is or where he's going.

When he gets back she's waiting on the landing.

"Are you okay?" she asks.

"Yeah," he says.

After that he's sure that he isn't going to kiss her again. Then, a few days later, when she asks if he wants to sit on the sofa with her, he finds that part of him does.

"Do you want to?" she asks.

They're standing in her kitchen, facing each other.

She's quite tall, nearly as tall as he is.

"Okay," he says.

He follows her into the living room and they sit on the sofa and start to kiss again, with tongues.

This time, when her hand finds his erection, she seems deliberately not to do anything that might distress him. She just keeps kissing him in the same way and leaves her hand there, on top of his trousers. Then, after a few minutes, she starts to move it slowly up and down. She pushes her tongue farther into his mouth so that it's almost too much, so that he instinctively moves his head away and she slightly withdraws her tongue. Her hand is still moving slowly up and down in a way that he likes, although it's moving much more slowly than he would move his own hand, and maybe because of that, because it's moving so much more slowly than he would move his own hand, he realizes too late that he's about to come.

The sound he makes is like a gasp of pain.

A moment later he's aware of the wetness inside his trousers, and then the smell of it.

It feels like a disaster, what's happened.

He has no idea what to do, no idea if she will even understand.

She seems surprised too.

She has stopped kissing him.

He isn't looking at her. He's looking at the floor, at the fringed edge of the rug.

If he looked at her he would see that she was smiling at him. But he doesn't look at her. He doesn't want to see her. He is ashamed

and also sort of horrified that he is doing this with someone old and ugly like her.

"Go on," she says, and he stands up and leaves.

A little later there's a knock at the door of the apartment.

It's her.

He wonders if she wants to talk to his mother, who's still at work—maybe to tell her what's been happening, an idea that makes him feel something like terror.

Actually it's him she wants to talk to.

"Are you all right?" she says.

She says it in a soft, kind voice that surprises him.

"Yes," he says.

"What happened before," she says. "I just want you to know—it's okay. If you were embarrassed or I don't know. You don't need to be. It's okay."

He doesn't say anything.

"I just wanted to say that," she says. "That's all."

"Okay," he says.

"Okay," she says, and he shuts the door.

Sometimes at the weekend he works on her husband's allotment. Her husband pays him to do that.

The thick mud sticks to his shoes so that after a while his feet feel heavy in them and start to look like lumps of mud themselves.

The lady's husband says that he can't do physically demanding work anymore.

He has heart trouble, he says.

He has to take pills.

István isn't really listening. The days are getting warmer. He pulls off his sweater and hangs it on a fence post.

"You're a good worker," the lady's husband says, offering him a cigarette. "Don't you smoke?" he asks when István doesn't immediately take it.

"Not really," István says. His mother doesn't know that he smokes and he's worried that the lady's husband will mention it to her.

"What does that mean? Do you want one or not?"

István takes one.

"For me they're basically free," the lady's husband says, and explains that he works at the cigarette factory.

"Okay," István says.

He stands there in a damp T-shirt enjoying the smoke and the feeling of the cool air on his sweaty forehead.

There's the sound of the main road, which isn't far away.

When they finish work that day, after they have washed their hands at the standpipe, the lady's husband asks him if he wants a drink.

"I think we've earned one," he says.

The place he takes him to is a sort of wine cellar, in a side street not far from the allotment, down some steps from the sidewalk. The lady's husband seems to be well-known down there. Half-drunk old men say hello to him as he moves through the smoke.

The woman at the bar says hello to him as well and they exchange some chat as he orders the drinks—two white wine spritzers.

The woman lifts a lid set directly in the zinc bar and dips a ladle down there for the wine.

"This is István," the lady's husband says to her as she does that.

She just raises a painted-on eyebrow.

"He's helping me on the allotment."

"That's nice."

She adds soda to the glasses from a hose. There's something suggestive about the way her hand holds the hose, István thinks, about the way the soda shoots out when she does something with her fingers.

"Bit more," the lady's husband says.

She shoots another slug of soda into the glass.

"Thanks," he says.

He offers her a cigarette, which she takes.

"For me they're basically free," he says.

She nods, as if it's something she's heard before, and lets him light it for her.

With the cigarette in her mouth she takes the spritzers, one in each hand, and holds them out for them.

"I think we've earned that," the lady's husband says as they take their seats at a table.

He lifts his glass toward István for a moment and then drinks half of it in one go.

István starts on his more cautiously.

He doesn't really like the taste of the wine.

"How you settling in?" the lady's husband asks him. He knows that István is still quite new to the town.

"Okay," István says.

The next time they sit on the sofa, she stops kissing and draws away from him. He opens his eyes. "Can I?" she asks, looking at him. She has started to undo his belt.

He just nods.

Awkwardly he raises his hips from the sofa to help her as she pulls the trousers and pants down to his knees.

It's the first time that anyone else has seen him like this.

It feels strange, to have someone else there, looking at it.

She touches it with her hand, and then lowers her mouth to it.

To be comfortable, though, she has to kneel on the floor.

She kneels on the floor and takes it in her mouth again. He's looking at the top of her head, at the roots of her hair where the blond, he now sees, is slightly mixed with gray. He wonders how it is that her teeth aren't hurting him, that her mouth is so soft. He feels himself already starting to come as he stares up at the ceiling, and then at the balcony, where the afternoon sun is glowing in the green glass panels, and then at the top of her head again, which is moving faster now. And now she's doing something with her tongue that just... It's almost too much, almost like pain, though not pain, the opposite of pain.

He makes a small, startled sound.

Her head stops moving.

Her mouth slides off him. Her eyes are shut. So is her mouth—she inhales through her nose.

After a few seconds she stands up and leaves and from the kitchen he hears the sound of water in the sink.

He has this peaceful feeling.

For a minute or two he feels extremely at ease, just sitting there looking at the tidy living room, and at the balcony with the sun glowing in the panels of green glass.

On the balcony, in the sunlight, is a big jar with lots of small cucumbers in it, submerged in a milky liquid. Crammed in at the top of the jar is what seems to be wet bread.

She's making *kovászos uborka*, fermented pickles.

She comes back and sits down next to him on the sofa, and seeing her he again feels confused and sort of ashamed that he is doing this with someone like her, with a woman who might be older than his mother, who makes *kovászos uborka*.

She's stroking his hair.

"Did you like that?" she asks.

He nods.

Afterward he walks down the stairs and sits on a bench in the little park near the housing estate.

There's a man on the next bench who's smoking a cigarette.

István asks him if he can buy one.

"You can have one," the man says.

István goes back to his own bench and sits there smoking the cigarette that the man gave him. Small movements of air make the leaves on the branches above him clatter softly.

She shows him her breasts. The nipples are weird—surprisingly big, and brown, and with these little things like warts on them.

When he first sees them he's slightly disgusted. But then later, thinking about them, he masturbates more than once.

He finds it strange how, at the same time, he can find them slightly disgusting and also be so turned on by them, or by the memory of them.

It's partly the way she showed them, he thinks.

He was sitting at her kitchen table eating *Somloi galuska* while she put the groceries away and then, when she had finished doing that, she asked him if he wanted to see them and he said yes, and she just showed them to him—standing there in the kitchen she took off first her shirt and then her bra. It's the memory of her doing that that turns him on, as much as what they actually looked like. What they actually looked like seems almost irrelevant. Or that they were weird and slightly disgusting might even have had the effect of turning him on more.

When he had finished the *Somloi galuska*, they went to the sofa and kissed for a while and then she undid his trousers and sucked him off again.

Then he left.

The next time it happens she says, "I swallowed it."

"Yeah?" he says, still with that peaceful feeling he always has for a few minutes afterward.

She nods, sort of smiling at him.

"Okay," he says.

"Will you do something for me?" she asks.

"Okay," he says.

She takes his hand and puts it between her legs. She lifts her skirt up to her waist—she is wearing black tights underneath it—and puts his hand where she wants it.

She presses it there firmly.

The place where she presses it is soft and yielding through the layers of fabric.
When he does nothing, she starts to move his hand herself.
She positions his fingers precisely.
"Like that," she says. "There. Like that."
She lets go of his hand and he moves it himself.
There's something wrong with the way he is doing it though.
She takes hold of his hand again, and moves it energetically, pressing it into her. "Like that."
"Okay," he says.
She shuts her eyes.
He keeps doing it until his arm gets tired.
"Thank you," she says, when he stops.

On Sunday his mother takes him to lunch at the McDonald's in the new shopping mall. The McDonald's only opened a few months ago.

His mother watches him eat. She isn't eating herself. She has a paper cup of McDonald's coffee that she occasionally takes a sip from. "How's school?" she asks.

"It's fine," he says.

"At the parent-teacher meeting last week," she says. "They said you seem distracted sometimes."

He shrugs.

"Your marks have slipped a bit."

"Yeah?" he says.

"I wonder if it's that you're spending too much time playing those computer games," she suggests.

"No," he says.

"Then?"

"What?"

"I'm just trying to understand," she says. "Are you making friends?"

"Yeah."

"Yeah?"

He nods, not looking at her.

"That's good," she says.

He isn't sure if she believes him or not.

He and the lady walk to the supermarket. It's raining. He holds the umbrella over them both. "I want to make love with you," she says when they are in her kitchen again. "I want to feel you inside me. Do you want to do that?"

"Okay," he says.

"Is your mother at home?"

"No," he says.

They do it on his bed. She insists on the window shutter being fully lowered—maybe because of what happened when she showed him her breasts, the look of slight disgust or whatever it was that she must have seen on his face then.

She puts the condom on him herself. He lies on his back on the bed and she lowers herself onto him. He just lies there while she moves her hips and makes quiet noises. He can't really see her in the near-darkness with the shutter down.

A few moments after he comes she stops moving.

He feels himself shrink inside her until his dick slides out. It feels like it sort of slides out sideways. It's a strange feeling.

She leans down to him so that he smells her breath when she says that he's a man now, and asks him how that feels.

He thinks it's strange that he doesn't feel any different, that nothing seems to have changed. He doesn't say that. He just sort of shrugs, still lying there on his back, and she moves away from him and starts to get dressed again.

"Are you all right?" she asks when he doesn't say anything for a while.

"Yes," he says.

"Okay," she says. And then speaking to him out of the near-darkness she says that she feels honored that he did it for the first time with her, and thanks him, and then she leaves, and he doesn't move for a while.

He has a shower.

In the shower he gets hard again and masturbates.

It takes him a long time to come.

When he finally does, he leans against the tiled wall and listens to the water pecking at the plastic shower curtain, still thinking that it's strange that he doesn't feel any different, that everything seems to be the same.

He takes the bus into town and has a Big Mac Meal.

It's early evening when he gets back. The streetlights have just come on, all at the same time.

He meets her husband at the entrance of the building.

"Hello, István," he says. "How are you?"

"Okay."

"After you," her husband says, holding the heavy front door open for him. It's made of metal with two panels of security glass.

István goes in first and they walk through the low entrance hall past the mailboxes and up the concrete stairs together.

"What have you been up to?" her husband asks.

"Nothing much," István says.

For a few days he doesn't see her. He masturbates quite a lot, at least twice a day. Usually when he does that he's thinking of her, and of the things they have done together. Otherwise he doesn't think of her much. Except that he finds he does want to fuck her again. After a while he is unable to stop thinking about that, and the thought that it might not happen again is surprisingly difficult to deal with. Sometimes he wonders if he should knock on her door. Something always stops him.

Then, at the end of the week, she knocks on his door. He pauses the computer game that he's playing and opens it.

"Hello," she says.

He doesn't say anything, embarrassed that he already has a hard-on at just the sight of her standing there.

He puts his hands in his pockets.

She asks if he can come to the supermarket with her.

"Okay," he says. "I'll put my shoes on."

She nods.

They walk to the supermarket initially in silence as usual.

Then, as they wait at the traffic lights, she says to him, "What are you listening to?"

"What?" he says.

"What are you listening to?"

He has his headphones on and is listening to music.

"MC Hammer," he says.

"What's it like?"

He shrugs.

"Can I listen?" she asks.

He passes her the headphones, and she puts them over her ears.

"I don't like it," she says, after only a few seconds.

"Okay," he says.

When they get back he puts the groceries on her kitchen table. It's a warm day and his T-shirt is sticking to his skin.

She asks him if he wants some ice cream.

"Okay," he says.

"Sit down, then," she says.

He sits and waits while she serves him some ice cream in one of those glass bowls she has.

"*Rákóczi túrós*," she says.

"Okay," he says.

"You like that, don't you?"

He nods.

While he is eating it she sits down next to him. After just sitting there for a minute, she puts her hand on his knee.

"Is your mother at home?" she asks.

"No," he says.

"Try not to come so quickly," she says.

She twists and thrusts her hips while he lies there looking at the underside of the pine shelf on the wall above his bed.

Her movements become more urgent and he has a strange feeling that she's no longer aware of him.

Suddenly she stops moving altogether.

There's a moment of tension.

Then something happens.

She goes limp.

She puts her arms around him and lies still for a minute.

He feels the sweat on her, and on himself. It's hard to say whose sweat it is. There's a slippery layer of sweat between them.

Outside the sun is shining. The shutter is down but there are some small holes in it which let a bit of light through, enough to see her as she dresses, now that his eyes are used to the semi-darkness.

She has pubic hair, and a track of hair on her belly.

In porn none of the women have pubic hair, or not that much anyway.

None of the women have weird nipples like hers.

As long as no one knows about it, it's like it isn't really happening.

It's like it exists in the same way that his fantasies exist, as something he's just imagining.

That's how it seems to him sometimes.

He doesn't see her at the weekend, when her husband is at home.

He just wanders around the town.

He spends a long time in the secondhand shop looking at the computer games, the crate of cassettes in scuffed plastic boxes. The games are pirate copies, with badly photocopied instructions.

There's pirated music too, all the latest stuff from the West—Vanilla Ice, Madonna, Guns N' Roses.

He leaves the shop without buying anything.

The weekend seems to last forever.

On Monday they do it twice. In between they just lie there on the bed. There's the sound of the rain on the window—they can hear it sometimes but they can't see it because the shutter is down. After they have been lying there for a while she starts to suck him and he quickly becomes hard again. "Do you want to take me from behind?" she asks.

"Okay," he says.

She turns, and he sort of kneels on the soft mattress trying to find the place.

The rain patters on the window.

"No not there," she says.

She has to reach back with her hand to help him.

She's already extremely wet.

It feels different from that angle.

She worries, afterward, that they didn't use a condom the second time.

He isn't sure why she's worrying—he assumed she was too old to get pregnant.

"How old are you?" he asks her.

"Forty-two," she says.

"Do you look at pornography?" she asks him.

"No," he says.

"Don't lie," she says.

He wonders how she knew that he was lying. He doesn't say anything.

"Do you have some?"

"Why?"

"Do you?"

She laughs and asks to see it. "Please," she says.

He goes to his desk and opens the lowest drawer and feels with his hand on the floor underneath.

The magazine is starting to slightly fall apart.

"Are you embarrassed?" she asks, as he hands it to her.

"Yeah, a bit," he says.

"Why are these pages stuck together?" she asks.

"Why d'you think?"

"Oh," she says, and laughs again.

Prizing the pages apart, she looks at the pictures. They look at them together. There's something about doing that that he likes. The window shutter isn't down. They leave it open now. "I've never seen anything like this," she says. "The women all shave their... you know."

"Yeah."

"Do you want me to do that?" she asks, looking up at him.

"No," he says.

"Be honest," she says.

"I am being honest."

"You don't want me to shave it?"

"No," he says.

"So you like my hair?" she says.

"Yeah," he says.

He doesn't know if that's true or not.

“Your mother will be home soon,” she says.

She gets up from the bed.

“This is my favorite bit of the day,” she says. “I don’t mean when I leave.” She moves around, picking her clothes up from the floor and putting them on. “I mean when I’m here.”

Still lying on the bed, he watches her.

She’s nearly dressed now.

“What’s your favorite bit of the day?” she asks.

“Don’t know. This, I suppose,” he says.

When she leaves he thinks about what they did. He tries to kind of hold on to the reality of it. As soon as she isn’t there it seems slightly unreal.

“Do you think about me when we’re not together?” she asks.

“Sometimes,” he says.

“I think about you,” she says.

“Yeah?”

“Yes,” she says.

“What do you think about?” he asks.

“This mostly.” She takes his dick in her hand. She laughs. He laughs too. He likes it that she says things like that. He has never talked to anybody the way he talks to her, the way they talk to each other.

She puts baby oil on her breasts and he fucks them. She has a weird expression on her face, trying to look at what’s happening and lifting and squeezing her breasts together at the same time. The veins stand out in the middle of her forehead. When he comes it goes on her face and she shrieks with excitement, almost as if she’s coming herself.

Then some of it goes in her eye. “Oh,” she says. “That stings. It really stings.”

“Sorry,” he says.

With her hand to her eye, she laughs. “It’s not your fault.”

She goes to the bathroom to wash her eye out.

When she gets back her eye is very red.

“Is it okay?” he asks.

“It still stings,” she says.

“I’m sorry,” he says again.

“It’s okay,” she says.

She joins him on the bed.

He likes lying there naked while she touches him.

The rest of the day feels somehow fake compared to this. It feels like a less intense sort of reality. It feels unimportant.

The important part of life happens with her. That’s how it feels.

When she goes away for a week to visit her mother his life seems empty.

He drifts through the days at school with a sort of indifference to everything.

Without that hour in the afternoon to look forward to, there is nothing to give the days any sense of purpose or meaning.

When she gets back the summer holidays have started. He’s at home all day, and for the first time they do it in the morning.

“There’s something I’d like to do with you,” she says.

“What?” he asks.

She tells him.

“Would you like that?” she says.

There’s a lake ten or fifteen kilometers from the town, among the hills to the north. They take a bus there, first having to take one into the town center, where they wait for a second one that goes to the lake. Once the bus leaves the suburbs of the town it takes about half an hour to get there, mostly on a road through the forest where it has to keep slowing for sharp turns.

It’s almost empty by then. It’s the middle of a weekday and there aren’t many people going to the lake.

When they arrive she says she knows a nice place, where there won’t be anyone to disturb them.

“Okay,” he says.

The lake is surrounded by steep green hills.

They walk on a forest track under the trees.

As she said, there’s no one else around.

It’s pleasant in the shade under the trees.

She says she’s already wet and asks him if he wants to check for himself.

He’s not sure what to do.

She has stopped. He stops too.
"Do you?" she asks.
They're standing on the track under the trees.
The track is made of dried mud that has taken the imprint of tractor tires in places. In deep hollows the mud is still visibly damp.
The wind is shaking the upper branches of the trees.
"Yeah, okay," he says.
"Go on, then," she says.
He lifts her dress at the front up to about the level of her navel and puts a few of his fingers into her panties.
"See?" she says.
Again, he isn't sure what to do.
His fingers are still in there.
"So do you want to...?" he says uncertainly.
"What?"
"You know."
She laughs. "Not here," she says.
"Why not?" he asks.
"I know somewhere else," she says.
The trees end and there's a sort of meadow near the top of the hill.
They do it there in the long grass.

They eat *lángos* while they wait for the bus back to the town. She's worried that they'll meet her husband, or his mother, when they arrive back at the housing estate—it will be about the time that they both get home from work. So she says that they should arrive separately. At the bus station in the town she tells him to wait and take the bus after her.
"Okay," he says.
When she has gone, though, he feels something painful and confusing.
"I love you," he says to her, the next day. They're lying on his bed.
"Don't say that," she says.
"Why not?" he says.
"You don't know what that means," she says.
"Yes, I do," he says.
"You don't," she says, stroking his hair.
It makes him angry, the way she does that. He moves his head away.
"Why do you say that?" he asks her. "Why do you say I don't know what that means?"
"You don't love me," she says.
"I do."
"Please," she says. "Stop saying that."
"Why?"
"If you keep saying that we'll have to stop this," she says.

The next day she tells him that they have to stop it anyway. "I'm sorry," she says. "I really didn't think this would happen."
"What?"
"How you feel," she says.
"That I love you?" he says.
"You don't."
"Yes, I do."
She puts her hand on his face. "Well, I don't love you," she says. "I'm sorry." She looks tired, as if she hasn't slept much, as if she was awake for most of the night.
"Do you love your husband?" he asks her.
"What difference does that make?"
"I just want to know."
"It doesn't make any difference," she says.
"Yes," he says.
"Why?" she asks.
"Do you love him?"
"Yes, I do," she says.
"How can you say that?" he says.
"I don't think you understand the situation," she says.
"I think I do," he says.
"No, you don't," she says. "I don't think you do. I'm sorry. I'm sorry," she says. "Please don't cry. I'm sorry."

He spends a lot of time hanging around on the stairs, waiting for her. It seems impossible to him, after what they have done together, that what she says is true—that she doesn't love him, that she loves her husband.

He waits for her on the stairs. When she sees him there she hesitates, as if wondering whether to step back into her apartment.

He's on the half-landing, where the stairs turn and her plants stand in a line next to the low window. Hot afternoon sun slants in.

"What are you doing here?" she says to him, without stopping.

They have already met on the stairs a few times.

Following her down, he says what he always says. "I want to see you."

"I'm sorry," she says.

"Please," he says.

"No," she says. "I'm sorry."

"Please."

She stops on the second-floor landing and says, turning to him, "No. You have to stop this."

"What?"

"Waiting for me like this."

"I want to see you."

"No."

She continues down the stairs and leaves the building.

She looks angry to see him still there when she returns nearly an hour later.

"What are you doing?" she says.

"Waiting for you."

"Why?"

"I want to talk to you."

She won't let him take the shopping from her.

He follows her up the stairs.

"I want to talk to you," he says again.

She ignores him.

"You have to stop this," she says, finally speaking to him again when they arrive at her door.

"Please," he says.

"No."

She starts to unlock the door.

"I love you," he says.

"No, you don't."

"I do."

"Stop saying that."

Seeing that she is starting to hate him, he decides not to try to see her for a week. He hopes that if he does that she will eventually agree to see him again.

After only a few days, though, it's unbearable not to see her at all. Not to know where she is or what she's doing. Even her hatred and anger would be preferable to that, is what he feels, and it's with that feeling that he knocks on the door of her apartment one evening. He isn't sure exactly why he's doing it, or what he will say. He just wants to see her.

He has to knock for quite a long time.

Finally her husband opens the door. "What is it?" he says.

"Is she there?" István asks him.

"What?"

"Is she there?"

"What are you talking about?" her husband says.

"Is she—"

"*No*," her husband says, already shutting the door.

Instinctively István pushes it open again.

Her husband puts out a hand to stop him. "What do you think you're doing?" he says.

Sure that she is there and that her husband just wants to prevent him from seeing her, István tries to push past him into the apartment. Her husband tries to stop him.

There's a scuffle on the landing.

Mostly it's just pushing and shoving.

And then her husband falls down the stairs. He tries to hold on to the metal handrail but he isn't able to and there's a strange loud sound as his head hits it farther down, and then he's lying on the concrete floor of the half-landing, next to his wife's plants, and he doesn't get up.

István waits for him to get up.

It's very quiet suddenly.

He hears voices from somewhere down in the stairwell.

When it's obvious that the man isn't going to get up, István starts to walk down the stairs.

His legs are shaking under him. They're shaking so much that it's almost difficult to walk.

He passes the landing where the man is lying—and where a few of his wife's plants have been knocked over, spilling soil onto the concrete—and keeps going down.

On the floor below the apartment doors are open and some people are standing there. He passes them without saying anything, and they don't say anything to him. It may be that they think he has nothing to do with what happened, whatever it was. They heard something, shouts and maybe the loud noise when the man's head hit the metal handrail. They're looking up the stairwell as if they're wondering what happened. He walks past them down the stairs and out into the warm evening.

It's still quite light outside.

He walks away.

He doesn't know where he's going.

He just keeps walking.

He doesn't know how long he walks for, only that it's already dark when a police car drives slowly past him on an obscure quiet street and stops up ahead, near a small store on a corner, and two policemen get out.

When he tells them his name they put the handcuffs on him and one of them says into his radio that they have him.

There are some oldish men outside the small store who watch the whole thing. They watch in silence as the police put the handcuffs on him.

And then one of them says, "What did he do? Steal a liter of milk?"

And one of the policemen says, "No, he killed someone."

When the policeman says that the whole situation feels even stranger.

Later, at the police station, another policeman, a more important one, tells him directly that the man is dead.

He just stares at the policeman when he says that, and the policeman, who's not wearing a uniform, who's wearing jeans and a T-shirt, says, "You don't have anything to say?"

Probably he doesn't even seem surprised and the policeman says, "You knew he was dead, didn't you?"

He shakes his head.

And the policeman asks him why he left the building then, if he didn't know that the man was dead, why he didn't call an ambulance.

"I don't know," he says.

"You don't know?" the policeman says. "You don't know why you didn't call an ambulance? People might think that if it was an accident you would have called an ambulance."

It's at that moment that he understands for the first time what the policeman thinks—he thinks that he deliberately killed the man.

And in a way he starts to doubt his own memories of what happened.

He starts to wonder if he is remembering it right or not.

He wanted the man dead.

He *did* want him dead.

"You wanted him dead, didn't you?" the policeman says to him.

And he doesn't deny it. He doesn't say anything.

And when the policeman says that he pushed the man down the stairs with the intention of killing him, he starts to wonder if maybe that actually was what happened.

He starts to have this feeling that he wanted the man to be dead, and then the man died, and that in some sense that went beyond the purely accidental he had killed him.

He *did* push him down the stairs.

That's why the man fell down the stairs.

He pushed him.

And it's hard to say what his intention was.

It's hard to say what his intention was when he did that, when he pushed the man and he fell down the stairs and hit his head on the metal handrail and then lay on the concrete floor of the half-landing, next to his wife's plants, and didn't get up.

2

He and Ödön wait in the cold wood. It's a winter afternoon and under the trees it's already quite dark as they stand next to the car smoking cigarettes.

"Who're we waiting for?" István asks.

"Just some guys," Ödön says.

"Are we in Croatia?" István asks, a minute later.

Ödön shrugs.

"It's fucking cold," István says, a few minutes later.

"Yeah," Ödön agrees.

After a while another car comes along the track, from the opposite direction. It's a small Suzuki jeep with Croatian plates.

"Wait here," Ödön says. "Keep your eyes open."

He walks toward the jeep, which has stopped.

Two men get out and they talk. They seem to be speaking English but they talk in quiet voices and István can't hear what they're saying.

He can't see them very well either in the dusky light.

He just stands there, with his hands in his pockets, feeling cold.

His feet, especially, feel very cold.

He's wearing the wrong sort of shoes.

He looks down at them, and at the half-frozen mud of the track.

About a week ago he ran into Ödön in the town. He knew him slightly from the young offenders' institution. Ödön seemed pleased to see him and asked did he want to earn some money. István asked him what he meant. Ödön explained that he had to pick up some stuff in Croatia and needed someone to go with him.

"Why?" István asked.

"To watch my back."

"What stuff?" István asked.

"Whatever. That's not important."

"Why do you need someone to watch your back?"

"So that I feel safe."

"Why wouldn't you feel safe?"

"I'd feel safer with someone like you with me."

"What do you mean, someone like me?"

"You know what I mean," Ödön said.

And it's true that István had made a sort of name for himself in the institution. Like everyone in there he had to look out for himself. There were some fights. He had an aptitude for fighting, he discovered.

That's probably what Ödön was talking about.

When he told István how much he would pay him, István said he would do it.

And now he's here, in the cold wood, hugging himself and trying to hear what Ödön is saying to those two men about fifty meters away in the half darkness under the trees.

Ödön comes back with a bag, a sort of nylon sports holdall. He puts it in the car and then reverses along the track, the way they came.

"What is it?" István asks, blowing into his hands. "Drugs?"

"Whatever," Ödön mutters. He's twisted around in his seat, reversing along the track, which is too narrow for him to turn in.

It's nearly dark now.

When they reach the main road—which is itself just a quiet two-lane thing without any traffic—he puts the headlights on.

They drive back to the town and then to a part of it that István doesn't know very well. A few years ago it was mostly vineyards and fields. Now there are more and more houses on the hillside. They stop at one of them and István waits in the car while Ödön rings the doorbell.

"Who lives there?" István asks him, when he returns without the holdall.

"I don't know," Ödön says.

He pays István his money and drives him home.

They do the same thing a few more times that winter, and for a while István has money.

He mostly spends it on going out, although the town's nightlife is very limited. The main place is Jungle.

Sometimes he sees Ödön there. On one such occasion, when he's drunk, Ödön tells him that he thinks it's heroin in the bags they pick up. He says that one of the main heroin routes into Europe is through the Balkans, and that this might be part of it.

After they've had a few drinks they talk about taking one of the bags and selling the stuff themselves, if it is heroin.

They never do that, though.

They never even look in the bags.

They're too scared of the man in the house, and also they're satisfied with the money he pays them for delivering the stuff to him, whatever it is. It seems like a lot to them.

Then Ödön suddenly disappears and István is poor again.

He has struggled, since leaving the young offenders' institution, to find legitimate work. It's a time of economic depression and there aren't many jobs available.

He spends a lot of time just hanging around in the apartment.

He watches daytime TV, sits on the balcony smoking cigarettes.

Sometimes the probation people find him a day's work, unloading stuff from a truck or something like that, and when he does have money he still spends it in Jungle. It's not unusual for him to see Noémi there. She's his uncle's stepdaughter.

They hang out together quite a lot that spring and summer. He likes talking to her. She's one of the few people he's talked to about what happened, about why he was in the institution and what it was like there.

She works at the new Tex-Mex place near the main square of the town and sometimes, when he has nothing else to do during the day, he hangs out there, talking to her and drinking coffee.

As the summer wears on he spends more and more time there.

He seems drawn to the place and he starts to wonder what that's about.

Then he understands.

He's sort of in love with her.

He thinks she might feel something similar, the way she looks at him sometimes.

It's awkward, though, to make any kind of move, what with them being friends and everything. Even family in a way.

He sits on a tall stool at the bar and she asks him what he wants.

He says he wants coffee.

She turns to the machine, and he watches her while she makes him an espresso.

There's a single, sad-looking shelf of spirits on the wall behind the bar. Most of the bottles are empty, they're just there to fill it out. There's a particularly large number of empty tequila bottles with tops that look like Mexican hats or cactuses.

"So what are you up to?" she asks him.

"Today?"

"Yeah."

"Don't know," he says, helping himself to one of her Marlboros and then dipping his head to light it. He's not sure how she affords Western cigarettes. She won't be paid much for working here.

She takes one as well.

He's still holding her lighter. He only notices that he has it when he sees her looking for it. Without saying anything he lights the cigarette for her. He looks at her face while he does that, while her attention is focused on the cigarette in her mouth.

"Thanks," she says, lifting her head and exhaling smoke.

"Sure."

He puts the lighter down on the bar and tells her that his friend Riki is thinking of joining the army.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

"Why?"

"It's a job, isn't it?"

"Yeah," she agrees.

"He says you get everything—food, a place to live. You save all your pay."

"Okay."

They talk about that for a few minutes and then he fans himself with a laminated cocktail menu while she deals with some people who have finished their lunch and want to settle up.

When they have left the place is empty.

He should probably leave soon himself, he thinks.

He's been there for nearly an hour.

"Do you want another coffee?" she asks, putting the money in the till.

He doesn't want another coffee.

"Yeah, okay," he says.

While she makes it he starts to tell her about this date he had the other night. It's the sort of thing they talk to each other about these days. Over the summer they've increasingly talked about stuff like that.

"Oh yeah?" she says, working the machine. "Anything happen?"

"Not much."

Still facing away from him, she laughs. "Not much? What does that mean?"

"We kissed," he says.

"You kissed?" she says.

"Yes."

"Where did it happen, this kissing?" she asks. She's a few years older than him and sometimes talks to him like he's still just a kid.

"At her place," he says.

She turns to him, holding the coffee. It's on the house, that's understood. She knows that he doesn't have any money. "You went back to her place?"

"Yes."

"And you only kissed?"

"Yes."

"You surprise me," she says, throwing a few sachets of sugar onto the bar.

"Why's that?" he asks.

"I thought you were more of an operator than that."

"You thought that, did you?"

"Yes, I did," she says.

"Well, you're wrong," he says.

She raises an eyebrow.

"You're wrong," he says again, and drinks some of the coffee even though his heart's already going faster than it should be.

She has a drag on her cigarette and looks at him slyly through the smoke.

"Don't pretend to be a nice person," she says, smiling at him.

"I am a nice person."

She laughs again.

"What?" he says.

"Nothing," she says. "How many poor girls have you... *bedded* this summer?" she asks.

"Don't know," he says.

"Yes, you do. How many?"

"Five or something. I don't know. Depends what you mean."

"You know what I mean."

"Not exactly. What about you?" he says.

"What about me?"

"How many? This summer." When she doesn't say anything, when she just looks at him with a narrow expression, he says, "You've lost count?"

Still looking straight at him, she laughs.

"So?"

"Less than you," she says, turning away.

"I doubt that."

"I'm not like you. I'm a romantic," she says. She's washing the empty coffee cup in the small stainless-steel sink.

"Yeah, right." He knows that since she split up with Gábor, nearly a year ago, after they'd been together since they were at school, she's been "making up for lost time," as she put it herself once when he asked her why she slept with so many guys. She's starting to get a reputation, in the small world of the town's nightlife, as a bit of a slut.

"A romantic?" he says.

"Yes."

"I don't think so."

"I don't care what you think," she says.

"Oh, it's like that, is it?"

"Yeah, it's like that."

"Okay," he says.

With his arm he wipes the sweat off his forehead. His arm, after he has done that, is surprisingly wet. "A fan or something might be an idea," he says.

She shrugs.

She's also sweating. He hasn't failed to notice the sheen of sweat hanging above her upper lip and shining in the hollow of her throat.

"It's not up to me," she says, stubbing out her cigarette.

"Have a word with Péter, then," he says.

"He's too tight."

"It'd be an investment."

"He won't do it."

"Won't buy a fan?"

"He'd be a pain in the ass about it."

"Can I have some water?"
She fills a glass and puts it on the bar.
"So will you see her again?" she asks, while he thirstily drinks.
"Who?"
"This girl you kissed or whatever."
"Don't know."
"Do you want to?"
He shrugs.
"What does that mean?" she asks.
"It means—" He shrugs again.
"Don't you like her?"
"She's a bit boring."
"Still kissed her."
"Yeah," he admits.
"Sure you only kissed her?"
"Well."
"You did more than that, didn't you?"
"Maybe a bit," he says. "Her parents were at home," he explains. "It's a small panel apartment."
"That's why you didn't fuck her?"
"Not only that."
"I've been wondering, actually," she says.
"Yeah?"
"*You* live in a small panel apartment," she says. "You and your mom."
"Yeah," he agrees.
"How does that work?" she asks.
"How d'you mean?"
"You know what I mean. When you bring people back."
"What makes you think I bring people back?"
"Don't you?"
"Not really," he says. "Sometimes."
"Well, when you do."
"What?"
"Well, I'm sure your mom doesn't want to hear what you get up to."
"I'm sure she doesn't."
"I know what the walls are like in those apartments."
"Yeah?" he says.
"So?"
"Usually she's out," he says.
"Okay."
"What about you?" he asks.
"What about me?"
"D'you take people back to your parents' place?"
She still lives with her parents too—or at least with István's uncle and her mother.
"Gábor was there all the time," she says. "You know that."
"No, I mean since then," he says. "That was different. I mean Gábor was like part of the family, wasn't he."
"Yeah, I suppose," she says, taking another cigarette out of the packet, using two of her long, fake nails to pry it free of the others in there. She has fake eyelashes too. A lot of makeup.
"What happened with him, actually?" István asks.
"What happened?" She lights the cigarette.
"Why d'you split up?"
"I don't want to talk about it."
"Okay," he says. "I was just wondering."
"I don't want to talk about it."
"Okay."
She lights the lighter and stares at the flame.
"Busy, isn't it," he says, looking over his shoulder at the deserted space under the vaulted ceiling and beyond it the brownish glare of the street on the other side of the glass.
She sort of smiles, though obviously she doesn't find it funny, or maybe her thoughts are just on something else.
He pinches his damp T-shirt front and flaps it to try to get some air onto the skin inside.
"You had a vacation this summer?" he asks.
"You know I haven't," she says.

"Want to go to Balaton?" He's been planning to ask her that for a while.

She doesn't seem particularly surprised.

She doesn't seem particularly enthusiastic either, though, which is disappointing.

"When?" she says.

"Whenever. Just for the day. Have a swim, whatever. When's your next day off?" he asks her.

"Sunday," she says. "Or Monday."

"How about Sunday, then?"

At first she doesn't say anything. Then she says, "Wouldn't that be a bit weird?"

"Wouldn't what be weird?"

"Us going to Balaton together."

"Why?"

"I just think it would be a bit weird," she says.

"Why?" he says again.

"Wouldn't it?" she says.

"Why?"

"Can you stop saying *why*," she says, with a laugh.

He laughs too. "I don't know why you think it would be weird," he says.

"I just do," she says.

"I don't know why."

"Yeah, you've made that clear."

"Seriously," he says, "why?"

"It's just how I feel."

"Okay."

Trying not to show how disappointed *he* feels, he flaps his T-shirt again—it's from a secondhand shop, one of the ones that sells stuff from the West, and the picture of the baby swimming after the dollar on the front of it has already half faded away.

"Do you really not see what I mean?" she asks.

"Not really."

"Whatever," she says. "Just, we've never done anything like that."

"So?"

"So nothing. I'm just saying." She laughs. "Are you sure you want to spend an entire day with me?"

"No," he lies, smiling at her.

She laughs again. "I'm not sure I'd want to spend an entire day with *you*."

He isn't sure to what extent she's joking, if at all. He laughs anyway.

It's only yesterday that he saw her last so why does it feel like he hasn't seen her for weeks? He walks into town, through the warm evening. The Tex-Mex place is a garish cluster of lights in an otherwise dreary side street. He pushes open the glass door. She isn't there. He sees that straightaway. That other waitress is there. "Hi," she says to him. It's still quite early and the place isn't full. He just stands there for a few seconds and then says, "Noémi not in?"

The other waitress shakes her head.

"I thought she worked Wednesdays," he says.

"She asked to swap," the other waitress says.

"Yeah?"

The other waitress nods.

"Why?"

"I don't know," the other waitress says.

From the phone box on the corner he tries her parents' house. Her mother answers. "She's out," she tells him when he asks if Noémi's there.

"I don't know where she is," she says in answer to his next question.

Starting to sweat in the hot phone box, he asks her if she knows when she'll be back.

"No," her mother says.

He leaves a message for her to phone him when she gets in.

She doesn't phone until the next morning.

"Where were you last night?" he asks her.

"Where was I?"

"You weren't working."

"I know."

"So?"

She laughs. "What's it got to do with you?"

"Just wondering."
"I was out."
"Okay."
"Seeing someone."
"Who?"
"A friend."
"A friend?"
"Yeah, a friend."
She says what she actually phoned to tell him was that she asked her stepbrother Miki if she could borrow his car to drive to Balaton on Sunday, and he said yes.

On Sunday morning the sky is partly overcast. Enough that he worries she'll phone and say she doesn't think it's worth going after all.
He worries about that until, looking down from the kitchen window at about ten o'clock, he sees Miki's old red Škoda arrive.
"Why don't you ask her up for coffee?" his mother suggests, joining him at the window to see what he's so interested in.
"We should get going really," he tells her.
When the entry phone sounds his mother invites her upstairs anyway.
He stays in the kitchen fiddling with the coffee percolator while his mother lets her into the apartment.
They talk in the entrance hall for what seems like a long time.
Eventually Noémi appears in the kitchen doorway and without even looking at her he says, "Want coffee?"
"Actually no," she says, smiling. "I've had too much already. I'm shaking like a leaf." She holds out her hand.
"Yeah?" he says, washing a spoon.
She laughs.
"What's funny?" he asks her.
"I don't know," she says.
They leave ten minutes later.
István offers to drive.
"Miki specifically said that wasn't allowed," she tells him.
"Fuck Miki."
She hesitates and then throws the keys across the roof of the car, its red paint starting to come away in places to reveal something paler underneath, like skin after sunburn. "You better be careful," she says.
"I'm always careful."
"That's such shit," she says. "How long have you had your license anyway?"
"Few months," he says, adjusting the seat.
"If you have an accident I'll have to say I was driving," she says.
"Fine."
"No, it's not fine."
He's poking around with the key, trying to find the slot in the steering column. "I won't have an accident," he says, and turns the key.
The Škoda immediately lunges forward and stalls just short of the car in front.
"Fuck's sake," Noémi says.
"I didn't realize it was in gear."
"You should've checked."
"You should've told me."
"You sure you want to drive?"
"Yes."
Partly it's just that he wants something to do, something to occupy him, to absorb his nervous energy.
He puts it in neutral and turns the key again.
"There," he says when it starts without mishap.
"Well done," she says.
"Fuck off," he says.
She laughs.
She has her feet up on the tough plastic of the dashboard. They're a serious distraction, as are her legs in his peripheral vision.
He tries to ignore them as he directs the car out of the housing estate and onto the main road.
"How are you?" he asks, as he does that.
"What d'you mean?"
"What d'you mean what do I mean?"
"It's a weird question," she says.
"Is it?"
"Yeah."
"Why is it a weird question?"
"I don't know. It's the kind of thing grown-ups ask each other."

"Aren't we grown-ups?"

She laughs again. "Maybe," she says.

They leave the town and the car reluctantly picks up speed.

The wind booms at the open windows.

Dry fields of sunflowers and maize pass slowly on either side as they get stuck behind tractors and trucks on the two-lane road.

The weak engine struggles with overtaking, especially uphill.

They don't talk much, partly because the wind noise means they'd have to shout, and if they put the windows up it would be unbearably hot.

Just for something to do, Noémi rummages in the mess of the glove compartment and finds some of Miki's tapes.

She puts one on and they laugh at his shit taste—it's Hungarian metal, some deep-voiced guy yelling about death and the devil.

When they get sick of it she stops the tape with her big toe.

"Thanks," István says.

"Want a smoke?"

"Yeah."

She lights a cigarette, hands it to him, and then lights another for herself.

There's an intermittent stench of farms and, sometimes, on straight stretches of road, a table under a faded sun-umbrella and someone selling peaches or melons. Sometimes as well, in the shade under trees, there's a bored-looking woman in a tank top and a miniskirt waiting where the entrance to a dirt track provides somewhere to pull over.

"Have you ever done that?" she asks him.

"What? Sold my body?"

She laughs. "Used a hooker."

"No," he says. And then, when she doesn't say anything else, "Seriously."

"It's okay," she says, laughing again, though more drily this time. "I believe you."

"I'd never do that," he says. "I don't need to pay for it."

"Listen to him," she scoffs.

"I don't."

"How many people have you slept with, then?" she asks.

"What? Ever?"

"Yeah."

"What do you mean *slept with*?"

"You know."

"No, I don't know. Do you mean like... fucked?"

"Whatever."

"Does a hand job count?"

She thinks for a moment and then says, "Yeah."

"I don't know," he says.

In fact he does, he knows the exact number. It is, he thinks, an embarrassingly small number. The three years he spent in the young offenders' institution were wasted from that point of view, and in the year since then it hasn't been difficult to keep a tally of the number of women he's had sex of some sort with.

"I don't know," he says again.

"Yeah, you do," Noémi says.

He asks her what her equivalent number would be.

She thinks for quite a long time, sort of marking things off on her fingers, and then says, "Twenty-three."

He tries not to sound surprised. "Yeah?"

"I think so," she says. "Unless I'm forgetting someone." She laughs.

"Twenty-three?" István says.

"Yes."

There's a sort of similarity in their situations in that they've both accumulated most of their experience, numerically anyway, in the past year, in her case because until about a year ago she and Gábor were together. That's why the number she said seemed surprisingly high to him. He knew she'd been sleeping around. Still, it seemed like a lot for one year. He says, "There was no one before Gábor?"

"Yes," she says. "There was."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. He was the second."

"Okay."

"And then there was no one else for... *five years*," she says.

"No one?"

"No."

"So," István says, trying to stay focused on the road ahead, "in the last year you've slept with twenty-one guys?"

"I guess so," she says.

"Okay."

"Are you shocked?" she asks.

"I don't know," he says.
She laughs. "You're shocked."
"Yeah, maybe," he admits.

They park in a street of gloomy bungalows near the lake.

After more than two hours on the plastic seat the back of his T-shirt is wet and stuck to his skin. He peels it off over his head, and then, standing on the pavement next to a chain-link fence, lights a cigarette.

It's fairly quiet—the summer season officially ended a week ago. Not that it's deserted or anything. People creak past on bicycles or walk toward the lake with towels and stuff. After locking the old Škoda they do that themselves.

The wind picks up as they near the water. The road they're walking down just stops, the asphalt disintegrating and giving way to sandy grass with some people lying on it and then the dark blue water of the lake and the strange outline shapes of the hills on the other side.

They swim and afterward she squeezes out her hair as they lie on their towels on the grass.

"Nice, isn't it?" he says.

"Yeah, it's nice," she admits.

They talk for a while about other times that they've each been there in the past, family vacations and school trips, and where they were and what happened, and when they feel too hot they swim again. The water is murkily shallow, a silky green soup of living things and dead things. Reeds mass along the shore. In one place there's a jetty that sticks out among them. It might be a private one. They lie on it anyway. The wind from the lake raises gooseflesh on their skin, and makes the reeds thrash sleepily. The wooden planks of the jetty have a hot, dry smell. For quite a long time they don't talk at all.

After a while he lifts his head and sees that she's sitting up and nervously twisting a stalk of grass with her fingers as she looks at the hills on the other side of the lake. He sits up and looks at them too. They look like furniture with sheets draped over it so that it's not possible to see exactly what's underneath, he thinks. For a minute they just sit there and he wonders whether to put out a hand and touch her. He wonders whether she might be waiting for him to do that.

And then the moment passes, and she's standing at the end of the jetty looking down into the water.

She turns and sees him watching her.

"What is it?" she asks.

He shrugs.

"I'm hungry," she says.

There are some makeshift eateries along the shore, and sitting on the terrace of one of them they eat greasy fish off paper plates with plastic knives and forks.

"How about a beer?" he suggests.

"All right, just one," she says.

Still in only his trunks and flip-flops, he goes to the counter and asks for two Sopronis and the woman takes them out of the fridge.

"Thanks," Noémi says when he sits down at the table with them.

He opens his and has a drink from it and then asks her if she's seen anyone recently.

"Seen anyone?" she says.

"You know what I mean."

"Like dates or whatever?"

"Yeah."

"No, not really. Nothing serious."

"What does that mean?"

"It means nothing serious," she says, prizing the last slivers of flesh from the soft skeleton of the fish in front of her.

He's hardly touched his.

He lights a cigarette and says, "You never answered my question, the other day."

"What question?"

"If you bring people back to your parents' place."

"Oh, that."

"Well?"

"No," she says. "Well, I did sometimes." She says she hasn't slept with anyone for a few months though.

"Seriously?"

"Seriously."

"Months?"

"Yeah."

"Why not?"

She shrugs.

"Don't you like miss it or whatever?" he asks.

"Miss it?"

"You know."
"Sex?"
"Yeah."
"There are other ways," she says, not looking at him.
"Other ways? You mean...?"
"I mean masturbation," she says.
For a moment he looks so embarrassed that she laughs.
"I'm sure you know a bit about that yourself," she says, wiping her fingers on a paper napkin.
"Yeah, a bit," he admits.
A few minutes later they're talking about porn.
She says she mostly looks at lesbian stuff because she finds the men in the films so off-putting.
"What do you mean?" he asks.
"They just seem to be such assholes," she says.
"The men?"
"Yeah." For a moment she imitates one of them—"*Take that, bitch, suck that, bitch*."
He laughs at the accuracy of her imitation.
"It's awful," she says.
"Yeah," he agrees.
"That that actually appeals to men. I mean, do you like that sort of thing?"
"Not particularly," he says, tapping the ash off the end of his cigarette. "And you find the lesbian stuff turns you on?"
"Yes," she says.
"Okay. Have you ever actually done that?"
"What, had sex with a woman?"
"Yeah."
"No," she says.
"Do you want to?"
"Not really." She laughs herself at the hint of ambivalence.
"Not really?"
"No. I don't think so." Seeming slightly embarrassed now, she turns it back on him. "What about you?"
"What about me?"
"Well, as I understand it you've actually *had* sex with another man."
He told her once, when they were drunk, about what happened in the institution that one time.
He sort of wishes he hadn't now.
He says, "That was nothing."
"That's not how you made it sound."
"We were desperate," he says.
"You sure that's all it was?"
He thinks she's just teasing him and laughs. "Yeah. Another one?" he asks, indicating her can of Soproni.
"We can't both have another one," she points out.
"No?"
"One of us has to drive back," she says.
"Well, not necessarily. We could stay the night," he suggests, and he's pleased how natural and spontaneous it sounds.
"Where?" she asks, not dismissing the idea out of hand anyway.
He shrugs. "I don't know."
"I'm not sleeping in the car," she says, laughing.
"I know."
"I'm not sleeping under a bush."
"I know," he says. "I was thinking a hotel."
She takes a moment to absorb that idea. "You've got money, have you?" she asks.
"Sure," he says.
"What money?"
"Money."
It's some money from his mother for his birthday. He doesn't tell her that.
"I don't know," she says.
"Why not?"
She seems to think about it again, looking at him while she does. Finally she says that if they're going to do that they should sort out the hotel now, while they're still more or less sober, in case they can't find anywhere later.
"Sure," he says, trying not to show how excited he feels, and anyway the feeling wavers when it turns out that most of the hotels near the lake are in fact full, and he starts to worry that maybe they won't be able to stay the night after all.

It's already early evening. Shadows stretch across the road as they approach the last hotel on that part of the shore, which is a brownish rough-looking concrete thing. The lobby is humid and dimly lit. "Yes, we have a few," the man says in answer to István's nervous question about rooms.

When the man tells him the price he takes Noémi aside and says, "I don't have enough for two."

"Rooms?"

"Yeah."

"So?" she says.

"Up to you," he says.

They take one room, a twin.

It's a concrete box with brown carpet and bobbly orange covers on the low beds.

Taking turns in the bathroom, they hang up their damp swimming things and then go back out and have another drink on a terrace next to the water.

They're not talking as much as they did before.

The sun is setting.

They sit there in the soft horizontal light.

"What?" she says.

He's looking at her.

"What?" she says again.

"Is it okay if I kiss you?" he says.

The moment he thinks of saying it, he says it.

He knows how it is. If he hesitates he won't do it.

So he doesn't hesitate.

He just says it.

And then, even though some foreign tourists are singing noisily at a nearby table, there seems to be total silence until she says, "Yeah it's okay."

Moths are attacking the lamps. The foreign tourists at the nearby table are still singing.

They stop kissing and just sit there looking at the other people.

They don't say anything. There's nothing to say now, it seems.

"Another?" he asks. He means a drink. He's holding her hand, which is hot and damp, sort of kneading it with his fingers. There's something wonderful about the fact that he's allowed to do that now.

"No I don't think so," she says.

"Should we go back?"

She nods.

It's only a few minutes' walk to the hotel. They walk back through the warm darkness. It seems obvious to him that they're going to sleep together now, and he's in a heady state of nervousness and excitement as they mount the stairs. They arrive at their floor and make their way along the silent, brown-carpeted corridor. His trembling hands take a moment to insert the key. As soon as they're inside the room he tries to kiss her again.

"No," she says quietly. "No."

"Why not?"

"Nothing's going to happen tonight," she tells him, sort of holding him at arm's length.

"Why not?" he asks again.

"Just like that," she says.

"Okay," he says, after quite a few seconds.

"All right?" she says, making sure he understands.

"Yeah."

She lowers her arms.

"Which bed do you want?" she asks.

"Whichever," he says, still not sure whether this is a definitive development, or whether there might be some way around it.

"I'll take this one," she says.

"Okay."

"I'm just going in there." She points to the dark brown door of the bathroom.

"All right," he says.

He lies on the bed that seems to be his and lights a cigarette. His hands are still shaking.

From the bathroom, a minute later, he hears the splattering of the shower.

She's having a shower in there.

The urge he has to open the door and look is almost too strong for him to resist.

He resists it, though.

He still hopes that what she said about nothing happening tonight will turn out not to be the final word on the matter. When he thinks about how she kissed him, about how they made out on that terrace in a way that may not have been entirely appropriate in a

public place, he can hardly believe that she doesn't want anything more herself.

He's on his second cigarette when she emerges from the bathroom.

A few minutes after that he takes his turn.

The shower is a sort of hose thing and he uses it and then wraps the small towel that's there around his waist and returns to the bedroom, where she's pretending to be asleep. She must be pretending. It's only been a few minutes. And indeed as soon as she feels his weight on the mattress, she sits up.

"What is it?" she says.

He's sitting on the edge of her bed. When he puts out a hand to touch her face she stops him.

"Please," she says.

From the way she says it, sort of almost frightened and almost angry, it's obvious not only that there isn't any hope of anything happening tonight, there isn't much hope of anything happening ever.

"Please," she says again.

"I don't understand," he says.

"What?"

"I thought..."

She waits for him to finish the sentence and when he doesn't she says, "I'm sorry. It's not that simple."

"Isn't it?"

"No."

"Why not?"

There's another long silence.

He says, "Is it because...?"

He doesn't finish that sentence either.

"Is it because what?" she asks.

He doesn't answer and then she says, "I wasn't totally honest with you."

"What do you mean?"

"I am sort of seeing someone. I'm sorry."

Sitting there almost naked in the dim light he just looks at her for quite a long time. "Who?"

"You don't know him."

"Who is he?"

"What does it matter?"

"I want to know."

"His name's John," she says, after apparently taking a few moments to decide whether to tell him or not.

"John?"

"Yes."

"A foreigner?"

"He's English," she says.

"English?"

"Yes."

"A tourist or what?"

She tells him that he lives in the town.

"Why?" István asks.

"He works for British American Tobacco," she says. "They own the cigarette factory now. He's a manager there."

There's another long silence, and then he says, "How do you know him?"

"He drinks at Tex-Mex sometimes," she says.

"Does he?"

She nods and it occurs to him that he might even have met this man, that there was a foreigner there a week or two ago when he dropped in to see her. An older man, maybe thirty or something, sitting up at the bar drinking expensive tequila and talking to her in English. He left soon after István arrived.

"You mean the one with the beard?" he asks.

"He has a beard," she says. "Yes."

"That small guy?"

"He's not small."

"He is."

"Whatever," she says.

"That's him?"

"Yes, that's him."

"You're seeing him?"

"Yes. I'm sorry," she says. "I should have told you." She seems to be about to touch him on the arm. Then she has second thoughts perhaps and doesn't.

He doesn't sleep well, or much at all.

Sometimes he drifts off for a while and then wakes up again.

And then it's light when he opens his eyes.

It's weird to wake up there, in that concrete hotel room, especially knowing that the motionless shape on the other bed is her.

She still seems to be asleep.

He tries to sleep again himself but it's hopeless.

He steps out onto the balcony—there's a small balcony that he didn't really notice the night before—and sits on the white plastic chair that's out there and lights a cigarette.

From the quality of the light and from the silence all around it's obviously still very early in the morning.

The weather seems to have changed.

There's a ledge of gray cloud hanging over the turquoise lake and the air has an almost autumnal coolness to it.

He's even a bit too cold, sitting there in his T-shirt and shorts.

He's been sitting out there for quite a while when her voice startles him.

"Morning," she says, from the balcony door.

He turns. She has the orange bedcover around her like a cloak, as if to hide the minimal clothing that she has on underneath it.

"Morning," he says.

"How are you?" she asks, and the question seems to have a more-than-normal significance.

"I'm all right," he says.

He isn't, though.

They drive back mostly in silence. The drive seems strangely short, it seems to take almost no time at all. She drops him at the housing estate where he and his mother live.

As he walks up the stairs he understands that the worst part is just starting.

For the next few days he hardly eats or sleeps.

He spends a lot of time on the balcony, smoking cigarettes.

It feels like autumn suddenly.

It's windy and leaves start to come off the trees.

It rains all night.

"You need to get a job," his mother says in the morning. They're sitting opposite each other at the small square table in the kitchen while the rain falls outside. "Are you listening?" she asks.

"Yes."

"You're thinking about something else, aren't you?" she says.

"No," he says.

"You need to get a job," she says again.

And a few months later, still unable to find anything else, he joins the army.

3

THERE'S SOME SORT OF HOLDUP. Every day they expect to fly out and every day they are told it will be "another twenty-four hours." They're staying in a hotel with a swimming pool. They spend most of the day next to the pool.

It's not really hot enough for swimming. It's not quite pool weather. It's like seventy-five or something. Still, they spend most of the day at the poolside—there isn't anything else to do.

The plastic sun loungers next to the pool face those towers—those three towers that look like spikes pointing at the sky, with a few blue spheres impaled on two of them.

He opens his eyes and sees them there, in the middle distance, pointing at the empty sky.

Usually in the afternoon a sort of light sleep comes.

Sounds in a spaceless world take on an abstract quality.

Sparrows.

A passing helicopter.

Voices at different distances.

Something else, he isn't sure what.

Sparrows.

He opens his eyes and finds things different. The shadows in different places. The quality of the light not quite the same, softer, more opalescent, and part of the pool in the shade, making the water there look flat and deep.

You want to have your last swim while the sun still has enough strength to warm you up again afterward. So at around four he stands up and approaches the edge of the pool.

For a while he lingers there, with a sad feeling.

Then he dives in, and the water sloshes and swallows in the drains at the side.

They have these vouchers they can use in the hotel restaurant, which is always a buffet. They eat all their meals there. There's a weird selection of things.

What there isn't is alcohol.

There isn't any alcohol anywhere.

Once or twice they go out into the city. There isn't anything to do there so they soon return to the hotel.

In the evening there's the sound of the mosques or whatever.

They start up all over the place, not at exactly the same time but sort of overlapping, so that the overall effect is slightly chaotic.

There's something about it that he likes, though.

The air seems to vibrate.

When they stop it's not all at exactly the same time either. They drop out one by one until there's only one left, and then that one stops too, and it's almost dark, and you can hear the sound of the swifts, the shrieks as they zoom around with what seems like incautious speed in the lingering twilight. Quite often he's sitting outside at that point, smoking a cigarette, with the swifts shrieking in the air around him. They skim the surface of the pool, he notices, taking a drink. It must taste horrible—the water is strongly chlorinated.

He stubs out his cigarette in one of the sand-filled ashtrays and takes the elevator up to the fifth floor.

He and Norbi are sharing a room.

Most of the prostitutes in Kuwait are from Southeast Asia.

At supper on Thursday word goes around that they'll be flying out tonight. They pack their stuff and wait in the lobby, still half-expecting to be told that it was a false alarm. That has already happened twice.

Buses arrive, though.

There's a murmur of excitement when they see them through the front of the hotel. These two white buses with nothing on them to identify whose they are.

For quite a long time after that nothing happens. The buses just wait there, with their Pakistani drivers smoking next to them.

Then finally the major arrives and they board the buses, which set off through the mild, quiet streets of the city.

Facing them from the front, holding on to two seats to maintain his balance, the major says that they're on their way to Ali Al Salem.

They won't be flying home, though.

He tells them that they'll be flying to Ramstein Air Base in Germany.

"From there there'll be transport to Tata. I'm sorry, lads," he says over their disappointed voices. "At least we're going home tonight."

There's some problem with the plane, though.

It doesn't leave until the next morning.

They spend the night lying on the floor at Ali Al Salem, using their packs as pillows.

There's a table with sandwiches wrapped in plastic, baskets of Mars and Snickers bars, glass bottles of soft drinks, and tokens for the coffee machine.

There's also a cigarette machine.

Using his last Kuwaiti coins, with their Arabic writing and pictures of sailboats, he buys a few packs to take home.

It's already midmorning when they walk across the asphalt to the plane. The plane is painted pale gray and like the buses doesn't have any markings on it to show whose it is.

It's an American plane, though. They know that.

For one thing, there are Americans on it too.

They mostly arrive in the morning, the Americans, looking like they've had a proper night's sleep. They're noisy and high-spirited.

"Where you guys from?" one of them asks.

"Hungary," István says.

"Oh yeah?" the American says.

"Yeah," István says.

With their heavy packs they walk across the asphalt to the waiting plane.

It's slightly cloudy. When the sunshine filters through it's soft. If the weather here was always like this it would be okay.

They leave their packs on the asphalt to be loaded and walk up the metal steps.

There isn't allocated seating. It's a free-for-all. He sits with Norbi and Balázs, and they talk about the night out they're planning to have when they get home. It's something they've been planning for a long time now, something they've sort of promised themselves—this massive night out, their first night home.

He sleeps on the plane.

He wakes up and looks around.

Everything seems exactly the same as it did when he fell asleep.

Most of the others are sleeping too.

From somewhere there's the sound of music leaking out of headphones.

More than half of the window blinds are pulled down, including the one next to him. He lifts it a little. Strong light pushes in so that it's painful and he slides the blind down again. It's impossible to tell from the quality of the light what time of day it is, wherever they are. It is day, though, and not night, even though it feels like it should be night.

They're waiting at the American air base in Germany. The Americans who were on the plane with them have disappeared. It's just them, the Hungarians, about a hundred of them, waiting under fluorescent lighting with darkness outside the windows. There aren't enough seats for everyone. Some people are sitting on the floor. The officers went off somewhere as soon as they arrived. They come back later with a cart with sandwiches on it. The officers don't eat from the cart themselves, they seem to have eaten already. The men mob the cart, though. They're very hungry, there wasn't any food on the plane. While they eat, the major tells them that the buses will be there in about two hours. "They're on their way from Tata as I speak," he says, and there's an ironic cheer.

István, Norbi, and Balázs are sitting on the floor with their sandwiches. They're talking again about the night out they're planning. "We need to get some speed or coke or both," István says.

"Yeah," Norbi says.

"Do you know anyone?" István asks.

"At Tata?"

"Yeah," István says.

"Not really," Norbi says.

"You?" István asks Balázs.

Balázs, eating, shakes his head.

The walk from the building to the buses waiting in the darkness outside, their engines shedding a strong smell of diesel, is the first time that he has felt real cold in over a year.

It's quite a pleasant feeling, the clean sting of it on his face, the unfamiliar sight of his own breath.

The light inside the bus is dim orange, almost brown.

He takes a window seat a few rows back from the toilet, and balls up his jacket to use as a pillow.

He wakes from a shallow sleep to find himself looking at a European landscape. Churches with onion domes. Wet green fields. It's weird to be back here.

When the buses arrive at Tata, about four hours later, they disperse to their allocated rooms. István dumps his pack and then sits on the toilet, and after that has a shower and a shave. He has this meeting with the colonel. He puts on his dress uniform, after ironing the shirt with the communal iron in the room at the end of the corridor.

"You managed to get some sleep?" the colonel asks him.

"Yes, sir," István says.

"We hoped to get you boys back here last night," the colonel says.

István's eyes are focused on a point beyond the colonel's shoulder.

"Yes, sir," he says.

Behind the colonel is a window, beads of rain partially obscuring a view of the car park.

"So you've decided not to do another five years?" the colonel asks.

"No, sir," István says.

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"Thank you, sir."

"You're a brave man," the colonel says, looking at a paper on his desk.

"Thank you, sir."

"What do you plan to do?"

"I don't know, sir."

"There are support programs that you can take advantage of," the colonel says. "I suggest you do so."

"Yes, sir," István says.

His five-year enlistment contract doesn't actually expire until the end of January, but he's owed enough leave to mean that this is basically it.

"Good luck," the colonel says. "With whatever you do do."

"Thank you, sir."

"And please remember that until the end of next month you're still a member of the armed forces."

István keeps his eyes fixed on the point beyond the colonel's shoulder. "Yes, sir."

"Conduct yourself accordingly."

"Yes, sir."

After leaving the colonel's office, he makes his way to the men's room on the first floor.

The private is already there when he arrives. They spoke on the phone earlier.

They go into one of the stalls and the private takes out the stuff. They asked around as soon as they arrived that morning and his name was the one that was mentioned most often. He sells István a few wraps of speed.

"Have you got any coke?" István asks him.

"No," the private says. "Not now."

"Okay," István says.

Norbi's brother has an apartment in Budapest. They arrive there in the middle of the afternoon, after taking the train from Tata, and then the metro. Norbi has a key to the apartment. His brother isn't there. He works in England or somewhere. "What does he actually do?" István asks.

"I don't know," Norbi says.

"He must have money," István says. "Look at this place."

Norbi shrugs.

He's cutting lines of speed on the black marble worktop.

István sits on a leather sofa, using an empty Red Bull can as an ashtray.

Without the speed and the Red Bull to keep him going he probably would have fallen asleep already. He didn't sleep much on the overnight journey from Germany. He only fell asleep properly once, he thinks. That was toward dawn. He must have slept for a while though, because when he woke up it was broad daylight and there was a wet patch on his T-shirt where he'd drooled on himself.

He stands up from the sofa to snort his line from the black marble surface. He feels the drug trickle down the back of his throat with a warm phlegmy sensation. He sniffs and rubs his nose.

"What time is it?" he asks Norbi.

He has no idea what time it is.

He keeps forgetting where he is as well. There was a moment, sitting there on the sofa, when he seriously thought he was still in Kuwait.

"Five," Norbi says.

István has a look around the apartment. It has an empty, unlived-in feeling.

Though there's furniture there don't seem to be any personal possessions.

There's some sort of huge Jacuzzi thing in the bathroom, with steps down into it.

He breaks open another Red Bull from the otherwise empty fridge and lights another Philip Morris.

"You hungry?" Norbi asks him.

"No," he says.

He feels edgy as they troop down the stairs, which are massive and made of stone. Their feet and voices echo. They're making a lot of noise, an unnecessary amount of noise, shouting at each other, pushing and shoving, laughing loudly at stupid things.

Then they're in the street, walking along in the early evening darkness and the sound of the traffic. They have a few beers in a sports bar, the first place they see. There's soccer on a screen. Toward the end there's a punch-up, with several players involved. One player is sent off. Soon after that the match ends and they go to the men's room to do some more lines. They take turns in the stall and snort the speed from the plastic top of the toilet. They've been looking forward to this evening for a long time. It was something they talked about a lot at Camp Babylon—this first night out when they got home. Just a normal night out, essentially. That's what they wanted. And that's what this is. Except there are moments when the very normality of it feels like a sort of outrage.

They tell the police that they're soldiers, just back from Iraq. The police found them pissing against the wall of a building. They were standing there pissing when the squad car rolled past and pulled over, and the policeman got out and said, "What do you think you're doing?"

It turned out that the wall they were pissing against was the wall of a police station.

"Hey," István said, doing up his trousers. "Sorry, seriously. We didn't realize."

That was when he told them that they were soldiers, just back from Iraq.

Flecks of falling rain show up in the headlight beams of the stationary squad car.

"I don't care about that," the policeman says.

"Okay," István says.

"What difference does that make?" the policeman says. "How does that make this okay?"

"Whatever," István says.

He tries to seem more sober than he actually is. He has had a few beers, on an empty stomach, after two more or less sleepless nights and a long afternoon of speed and Red Bull and more speed.

He's trying to hold it together.

It's not easy.

"Sorry," he says again.

"Go on, then," the policeman says. "Get out of here."

They have rum in some sort of rum place. It seems like a rum place. The bar has a thatched roof that's presumably supposed to look like something on the beach of a Caribbean island. The whole décor of the place is trying to get that vibe. They aren't that aware of it. It's quite dark in there. The rum-based cocktails have little paper umbrellas in them.

"These things actually work," Balázs says, closing and opening the one that was in his drink with a small papery flapping noise.

"Why don't you take it with you," Norbi suggests. "It's raining, isn't it."

Balázs holds it up as if it was an actual umbrella.

They laugh at that.

It seems very funny at the time.

Out in the street Balázs is still doing it, he's still holding it up as if it was an actual umbrella, and they're still laughing at it.

They get talking to two foreign girls in Morrison's. One of the girls is quite tall, the other one is quite short. "Where are you from?" István asks them.

"Norway," the taller one says.

He tells them they served alongside some Norwegian soldiers in Iraq.

"What were their names?" the taller girl asks.

"Sven," István says. "There was Sven and..." He turns to Norbi.

"Olav?" Norbi suggests.

"Yeah, Olav," István says. "Sven and Olav."

"Where were they from?" the taller girl asks. The taller girl does most of the talking.

"Where were they from?" István says.

"Yeah."

He turns to Norbi again.

Norbi just laughs.

"Oslo, is it?" István says. He starts to laugh himself.

"Did these guys even exist?" the taller girl asks, smiling at him.

"Yeah, I swear," István says.

They're speaking English. His English improved a lot in Iraq. It was the language they used to talk to the other foreign troops they were stationed with.

Norbi asks the girls if they want another drink.

They're drinking vodka Cokes, they say, after exchanging a look.

While Norbi takes care of that István talks to them about what they are doing there. "You on vacation?" he asks.

"No, we live here," the taller girl says.

"You live here?"

"Yeah."

"Why do you live here?"

"We study here."

"You study here?"

"Yeah."

"What do you study?"

"Medicine."

"Medicine?"

"Yeah."

"You must be very intelligent," István says.

"Yeah, very," the taller girl says, and laughs.

When Norbi gets back with the drinks he asks the girls if they want to do some speed.

They look at each other and sort of shrug and then say that they do.

They go to the toilet with them to take it, to the men's.

First Norbi goes with the taller girl.

Then István goes with the shorter girl.

Then Balázs goes by himself.

"Is he okay?" the shorter girl asks when Balázs goes.

"I think so. Why?" István asks her.

It's true that Balázs didn't look well.

"He's drunk," István explains.

They have a sort of rapport now, he and the shorter girl, after their minute of proximity in the toilet.

"Did you kill anyone?" she asks.

She's drunk too.

Even though he's drunk himself, she's drunk enough that he thinks, *She's drunk*, which must mean she's even drunker than he is, he thinks.

"In Iraq, I mean," she says.

"Yeah, I know," he says.

"So?" she says.

"I'm not allowed to tell you that," he says.

Then he says, "No, I'm joking. I didn't."

The speed has made her more talkative and she asks him some other things, and then Norbi's there with her friend saying why don't they go back to his place.

They wait near the entrance while the girls sort themselves out.

"Where's Balázs?" Norbi asks, after they've been standing there for a minute or so.

"Balázs?" István says.

"Yeah."

"Dunno," István says.

"When d'you last see him?" Norbi asks.

"He went to do some speed, didn't he?"

"Yeah?"

"Didn't he?"

They have a look for him and István finds him semi-conscious in the men's room, sitting on the toilet though with his trousers still on and his face pressed against a wall plastered with old stickers promoting DJ nights at Morrison's and other venues.

"Wake up, Balázs," he says. "We're going."

Balázs opens his eyes.

He seems to have been sick. There's some fresh vomit on the floor anyway.

"Wake up. We're going," István says.

Balázs looks like he doesn't understand what István is saying.

"We're going," he says again.

They walk to the apartment, which isn't far away. Balázs falls over twice and István has to help him. When they arrive, Norbi tries to remember the code that opens the front door of the building.

"You can't remember the code to your own place?" the taller girl says, laughing little puffs of steam.

"Yeah, of course," Norbi says.

Eventually he works it out and they go upstairs and he manages to get some music playing and finds a bottle of vodka and cuts some more lines of speed.

The taller girl has an Apple iPod and seems to know how to plug it into Norbi's brother's expensive sound system. "What is that?" István asks.

"It's a fucking iPod," Norbi says.

"What's an iPod?" István asks.

"What's an iPod?" Norbi says.

"Yeah," István says.

"What's an iPod?"

"Yeah."

"You seriously don't know?"

"No," István says. "What is it?"

The girls are laughing at them, and in fact they're deliberately hamming it up to amuse them.

Then the girls put on their own music very loud and start to dance.

István and Norbi dance with them, mostly making a sort of joke of it, which seems to amuse them too.

After a while the girls go to find the toilet together and come back asking if that's actually a massive Jacuzzi in the bathroom.

"Yeah," Norbi says, looking up from the black marble worktop.

"Does it work?" the taller girl asks.

"Yeah, sure."

He asks if they want to try it. He has cut some more lines with the last of the speed and he passes the taller girl the banknote they're using to snort them. "You want to try it?" he says again.

They don't answer—they're busy at the worktop.

"Actually, I don't even know if it works," Norbi says.

After they've snorted the last of the speed they go to the bathroom and Norbi tries to make the Jacuzzi work. For a while he presses buttons and there are beeping sounds. Nothing else happens though, except that the tub fills with hot water.

"Is this actually your apartment?" the taller girl asks him.

At that moment the Jacuzzi starts.

They stand there watching it go glub-glub-glub.

"Want to try it?" Norbi says.

There's some discussion and the girls agree to do it if István and Norbi go out of the room while they get undressed and only come back when they're already in the water.

István and Norbi wait outside.

After a few minutes István knocks on the door. He makes eye contact with Norbi. "Can we come in?" he calls.

The girls are both in the Jacuzzi, sitting down low to hide their breasts under the surface foam.

Norbi asks them if it's nice.

They nod.

They seem maybe a bit nervous.

The Jacuzzi has underwater lights that keep changing color—they go from blue to purple to red to blue again.

There are no other lights on in the room now.

"Are you going to join us?" the taller girl asks.

"Of course," István says, his eyes still adjusting to the semi-darkness.

He and Norbi start to undress.

"I like your tattoos," the shorter girl says when István has stripped down to his briefs.

"Yeah, thanks," he says.

Feeling slightly self-conscious, he slides off his briefs and steps into the water.

When he's sitting on the submerged ledge, the smaller girl moves over so that she's next to him and looks more closely at the tattoos on his shoulders and arms.

"They're really good," she says.

"Thanks," István says again.

"Yours are cool too," she says to Norbi as he, also naked now, takes his place in the tub.

"You got any?" István asks her.

She shakes her head.

Her taller friend is on the far side of the tub. Her face is flushed from the heat of the water and she seems to be keeping her distance from them.

She also shakes her head when István asks if she has any tattoos.

There's a definite tension.

Nobody seems to know what to do or say next.

István is about to say something just to stop things getting awkward when the smaller girl says, "I'm too hot."

She stands up and steps out.

At first the others seem unsure how to deal with this development. They just sit there in the water as she moves around the room looking at things, her wet skin shining in the dim and constantly changing light as the last traces of the tub's spume slide off it. She has a pierced navel and no pubic hair.

"Nice body," István says after a while, feeling again that someone should probably say something.

"Thanks," she says without looking at him.

A minute later she's sucking his dick while Norbi fucks her from behind.

The taller girl is still in the Jacuzzi.

She hasn't moved at all.

István is sort of half-aware of her, that she's still just sitting there in the water on her own, looking straight ahead as if nothing was happening.

The next day, in the afternoon, he takes a train to the town where his mother lives. Deer flee across flooded fields. In the distance are low hills the color of smoke.

He is sitting at one of the tables with four seats around it and he sees the passenger diagonally opposite him notice that the health warning on his Philip Morris packet, which is lying on the table between them, is in Arabic. He sees a moment of perplexity pass over the person's face when they notice that.

It's already nearly dark.

The last daylight flashes from the standing water on the fields and then instead of the dusky landscape it's his own face in the window, or a transparent, shadowy version of it.

He realizes that the things that are so important to him—the things that happened, and that he saw there, the things that left him feeling that nothing would ever be the same again—they just aren't important here.

Those things have no reality here.

That's what it feels like.

So it makes you feel slightly insane or something, to have those things inside you, when they seem to have no reality here.

Next to his head hangs a rough blue curtain with an ingrained smell of cigarette smoke.

He's in the smoking carriage.

He lights another Kuwaiti Philip Morris with the end of the last one and then presses out the old one in the little metal ashtray with the clinky lid.

When he went to Iraq he smoked ten to twenty cigarettes a day.

Now it's forty.

His mother pushes the pan of *székely káposzta* toward him. "Have some more," she says.

"Thanks," he says.

They're sitting at the small square table in her kitchen.

The kitchen is still the same as he remembers it, in every detail. Except there's the postcard he sent her from Kuwait attached to the fridge. A picture of those towers with the blue spheres on them. He sent it on his way out to Iraq, about a year ago. They spent a few days in Kuwait then as well.

He spoons more of the stewed cabbage and meat onto his plate. *Székely káposzta* is his favorite, has been ever since he was a kid.

His mother knows that.

She stands up and saws off another slice of soft white bread.

"There you are," she says.

He takes it from her.

She's drinking red wine. He said he didn't want any.

He asked her if she had any Coke.

She didn't.

"So what was it like?" she says.

He shrugs.

There's the sound of the phone from the other room.

"Sorry," she says.

She goes through to answer it.

While she's gone he unsticks the postcard from the fridge and looks at what he wrote a year ago. He looks at it with the feeling that it was written by someone else. It's some stuff about how hot the weather was, that he was fine. They weren't really allowed to write anything else. *It's very hot here. I'm fine.*

He sticks the postcard to the fridge again.

Also on the fridge is a cutting from the local newspaper. It's about him. About how he was given a medal for what he did.

His mother comes back.

"You had enough?" she asks, indicating his plate.

He nods and says, “Okay if I smoke?”

“Go on, then,” she says, and opens the window. “I know your friend was killed,” she says, putting the sour cream back in the fridge. “It was on the news.”

“Sure.”

“That he was killed,” she says.

“Yeah.”

“What happened? Do you want to talk about it?”

“Not really,” he says.

“Okay, then,” she says. “I’m sorry anyway.”

“I know,” he says.

He lies on the bed in his old room, smoking a cigarette.

He wonders why he didn’t want to talk to her about it.

Usually he talks to her about things.

She’s the person he talks to about things.

So why didn’t he want to talk to her about this?

There’s this feeling that she wouldn’t understand something important about it, something so important that the whole exercise of talking about it would seem futile, or worse.

The strange thing is, he isn’t exactly sure what that something is, the thing that she wouldn’t understand.

In a way it’s all of it.

The whole thing, what it was like. She wouldn’t understand that. And without that—

There’s a knock on the door.

“Yeah?” he says.

“You okay?” her voice says.

“Yeah,” he says.

She opens the door a little. “I’m going to bed,” she says.

“Okay,” he says. “Good night.”

“Good night,” she says. “Sleep well.”

“Yeah.”

The next day they go to the supermarket car park where the Christmas trees are sold and spend a while looking at them. There are hundreds of trees piled on the asphalt. When they’ve settled on one the man puts it through the metal funnel to sheath it in plastic netting for them and they take it home, with István on the heavy end.

The day after that it’s Christmas Eve. His mother lays a nice table in the living room, with lace and candles in glass holders, and the two of them have the usual supper of fish soup and *beigli*. Afterward they exchange gifts. His mother has another glass of wine.

Later they watch *Die Another Day*, which is on TV. When it’s finished he stands on the balcony and smokes a cigarette. It’s a mild, damp night, and the housing estate is very quiet. In the room behind him his mother is still watching the interminable end credits of the film and the Christmas tree lights are still doing their sequence.

Toward the end of January, his mother says she might have found him a job.

“What?” he asks.

“At the winery,” she says.

“Them again? They didn’t take me last time.”

“You weren’t a war hero then,” she says.

The winery is in a village about thirty-five kilometers south of the town, almost on the Croatian border.

His mother drives him down there for the interview.

She has a car now, a secondhand Suzuki Ignis.

The morning they drive down there the countryside looks totally dead. The only signs of life are the faint plumes of smoke above some of the single-story houses when they pass through a village.

The winery is in a more substantial village than most of the others in the area. There’s even a sort of café, where his mother sits while he does the interview.

The owner of the winery interviews him. He’s a red-faced, middle-aged man. He mostly asks him about Iraq, what that was like.

“So probably you want to know a bit about the job,” he finally says.

“Sure,” István says.

The winery owner explains that it would involve managing the warehouse—keeping track of deliveries and shipments.

“Okay,” István says.

“So you’ll take it?”

“Sure,” István says.

They shake hands.

His mother is having a second coffee and doing a sudoku puzzle when he gets back to the café.

"How did it go?" she asks.
"I got the job," he says.
"I knew you would," she says. "How much did they offer you?"
"You mean money?"
"Of course."
"I don't know," he says.
"You don't know?"
"He didn't say."
"And you didn't ask?"
"No," he says.
"You're so innocent," she says.

The work at the winery is essentially a matter of keeping records. Since Hungary is now in the European Union the winery buys its new bottles from Italy. They are cheaper and better, the owner says. They arrive on a truck every second Tuesday, tens of thousands of them. It takes a while to unload, and as well as keeping track of the numbers, István has to make sure that they aren't damaged. With so many there are always a few that are cracked or whatever and that's okay, the owner says, as long as it is only a few.

When the bottles are full of wine they go out to shops around the country and to restaurants mostly in Budapest.

Again, he has to make sure that the shipments are properly recorded.

One of his colleagues also lives in the town and drives down to the village where the winery is every day. He takes István, and István pays him some money toward the gas. Every morning he shows up in his old red Citroën AX.

When István first starts working at the winery it's icy and only just starting to get light when his colleague shows up.

By April, though, the sun is already above the trees between the housing estate and the road, and the trees are in leaf, and the air is quite mild when he goes down the concrete stairs and leaves the building.

The drive takes about forty minutes. His colleague has been working at the winery for a long time, and he seems to assume that István will do the same. He says things like "After you've been here a few years..." and "You wait till you've been here as long as I have..."

István mostly just sits there looking out at the countryside, which is quite picturesque, especially now, in spring, and enjoying the taste of the cigarette smoke in his mouth. The boom of the wind ripples at the windows, which are down a few centimeters to let the smoke out.

To the extent that he thinks about it at all, he thinks of the job at the winery as a very temporary thing, something he will do for a few months maybe, just until he finds something else.

Except that he isn't actually trying to find anything else.

It's like he's waiting for something else to find him. Or not even that. He isn't really thinking about the future at all.

When he gets home in the afternoon he walks up the stairs of the building and forgets about all that, about work and the future and everything.

He looks in the fridge.

He smokes on the balcony.

He watches TV—the news, or some quiz show.

He pours himself a glass of Coke.

His mother makes them some food.

And then it's the next morning again and he's standing in front of the building waiting for the old red Citroën to arrive.

The work itself isn't very interesting. After the first few weeks he's able to do it without thinking. It takes a certain amount of focus though, which means that it's not possible for him to think about other things while he's doing it, or even for his mind to empty of thoughts altogether like it sometimes can when you do physical labor. It's not like physical labor in that way. In a way, he would prefer to do physical labor. He envies the man who drives the tractor. The people who prune the vines. They're pruning the vines now. He never knew about that before, about how they prune the vines right back to almost nothing every spring. The owner of the winery takes the people who work in the warehouse and the office to see them doing it—he says he wants them to be aware of what actually happens on the land. The day they go up there the workers are burning the pruned stems in piles on the grass at the sides. The white smoke rises into the air. The sun shines through the rising smoke. There's the scent of the smoke and the quiet crackle of the burning stems.

It's the Pentecost long weekend, in late May.

On the Monday afternoon he's lying on his bed, smoking a cigarette. When he's finished it he stubs it out in the ashtray.

He doesn't know why he does what he does next. Something wells up in him. It feels as purely physical and involuntary as throwing up.

There's a surprisingly loud noise and the door has a splintery dent in it now.

For a while he doesn't feel anything in his hand, but when he tries to take another cigarette with it he can't.

He uses the other one.

Yeah, fuck, his right hand hurts a lot.

It hurts so much suddenly that he needs to do something.

In the kitchen, using his left hand, he opens the freezer and pulls out a bag of peas.

He sits at the kitchen table with the frozen peas on his right hand.

He's sweating weirdly heavily, he notices. His shirt is sticking to him.

The peas seem to be helping and he takes them to his bed and lies there on his back with his right hand on his chest, and the peas on his hand.

He's shivering now even though it's warm, and when he looks at his hand again half an hour later it's about twice its normal size and dark red. It's also hurting more than ever. He should probably show it to a doctor, he thinks.

Still heavily sweating he leaves the apartment with his shoelaces flapping around undone and starts down the stairs.

The nearest hospital isn't far.

He shows his hand to someone in the entrance area and they tell him where to wait—it's a wide, windowless corridor with metal seats down the sides and another two rows of them back-to-back in the middle. All the seats are taken so he stands next to the vending machine. It's noisy in the corridor, with so many people there. There are some doors with numbers on them—though the numbers don't seem to make any sort of sequential sense—and every so often one of the doors opens from the inside and some of the people who are there press in around the person who opened it, usually a middle-aged woman in green hospital clothes whose expression seems designed to deter inquiries. Sometimes, though not always, she says a name and one of the people waiting there is admitted to the room. After he has seen that happen a few times, he understands that he's supposed to make himself known to the woman as well and the next time she opens the door he pushes his way to the front and shows her his hand and without saying anything she adds his name to a list.

He takes his place next to the vending machine again and waits there for another hour and then joins the crowd at the door the next time it opens and reminds the woman in the green clothes that he's waiting.

"Yes, I know," she says. "Please be patient."

Finally his name is called and he's admitted to the room behind her.

The room seems very quiet and peaceful after the noise and tension of the corridor. There's the woman in medical green and a bearded young man in a white coat who's presumably a doctor. He's no older than István and possibly younger. He asks what the problem is and István shows his inflated hand. "Okay," the doctor says.

"I'm not sure if it's broken or what," István tells him.

"Oh, it's broken," the young doctor says, with a laugh. "What happened?" he asks.

István says he punched something.

The doctor waits for him to elaborate.

"A door," István says, feeling ashamed.

When he doesn't add anything further, the young doctor says, "Okay."

Something about him irritates István. Maybe it's the way that he's smiling. Or maybe it's just that he's his own age and a doctor. "Does it hurt?" the doctor asks.

"Yes," István says.

"A lot?"

"Quite a lot."

"Have you taken any painkillers?"

"Today?"

"Yes."

"No, I haven't."

The doctor asks the woman in green for some codeine and she gives the white pill to István with a small paper cone of water.

"Thanks," István says.

When he has swallowed the pill he returns the empty cup to her and she drops it in a bin.

"We'll need an X-ray," the doctor says while that's happening.

He says some technical-sounding things to the woman in the green clothes and she writes out a slip, which she hands to István.

The doctor tells him to take it to the radiology department upstairs and wait there.

The situation at the radiology department is similar, although there are fewer people waiting and the corridor is quieter and more dimly lit. There's also a window at the end of it through which he can look down at the Aldi car park, which is more or less empty today.

While he waits he phones his mother. He's tried her once already. This time she answers and he tells her that he's at the hospital.

"Why?" she asks, sounding worried.

He tells her what happened.

"You punched a door?" she says.

"Yes."

"Why?" she says.

"I don't know," he says.

His mother doesn't say anything.

He waits about an hour for the X-ray, and when it's his turn they put a sort of heavy, rubbery vest on him.

The man tells him where to put his hand and moves some instrument on a long articulated arm until he's satisfied that it's in the right

place.

Then, after telling István not to move, he withdraws and when he next speaks it's through an intercom.

He's telling István that he can leave.

Outside in the corridor someone else, a younger woman, helps him off with the heavy vest.

She says he should go back to the doctor who sent him there.

He has to wait another hour for that too, in the noisy corridor downstairs.

"So," the young doctor says, smiling at him again when it's his turn. "It's not a simple fracture."

"Okay," István says.

The doctor says that it might be necessary to do an operation.

"Why?" István asks.

"You might lose some movement in these two fingers," the doctor tells him, indicating the two smallest fingers of his own right hand, "without an operation."

"What do you mean lose some movement?"

The doctor explains. It doesn't sound very serious, the loss of movement he's talking about, and István says so.

"So you don't want the operation?" the doctor asks.

"Is it worth it?"

"It's up to you," the doctor says.

"What happens if I don't have the operation?" István asks him.

"Well, then I'll just try to put the bones back the best I can and set it," the doctor says.

"You mean with plaster?"

"Yes."

"Okay."

"You want to do that?"

"Yeah."

The doctor says he'll need him to sign a paper that the woman in the green clothes starts to prepare. While she's doing that the doctor gives István an injection into his right hand. "This might hurt a bit," he says.

"Okay," István says.

It does hurt, though not as much as he thought it would.

"We'll give it a few minutes," the doctor says.

The hand already feels numb.

The woman in the green clothes has the paper ready for him now.

"What is this?" István asks.

"It just says you refused the operation," the doctor tells him, from the other side of the room where he's taking things out of a drawer.

Put like that it sounds as if it might be a mistake and István hesitates. "Am I doing something stupid?" he asks.

"It's your decision," the doctor says.

"Do you think I should have the operation?"

"It's your decision," the doctor says again.

The woman in green is still waiting there with the paper. She puts it down for István to sign, and he takes the pen with his left hand, and then turns to the doctor with a look that says, *What am I supposed to do?*

"Just make some sort of mark," the doctor tells him. "How is it?" he asks, meaning the hand he injected.

"I can't really feel it," István says, using his left hand to put an illiterate-looking scrawl on the paper.

"Can you feel it?"

"Not really."

"Can you feel this?" the doctor asks, prodding it with the pen that István has just handed back to him.

"No," István says.

The doctor says he's going to try and put the bones back as they should be.

"Okay," István says.

"This will probably still hurt," the doctor warns.

"All right," István says.

The doctor takes the hand and starts to tug and shove at the smallest two fingers and immediately out of the numbness a dull pain comes.

He can only imagine what the agony would be like if it wasn't for the anesthetic. For the last few hours the slightest brush of anything on the hugely swollen hand has made him flinch with pain and now this doctor is sort of wrestling with it.

The pain starts to get worse and he has an impulse to pull the hand away. He feels something like fear. He wants to tell the doctor to stop. He inhales through his nose.

There's sweat on the doctor's smooth young forehead.

The woman in green watches, looking slightly worried.

The doctor stops. "Okay," he says. "That should do it." He shapes the hand into a particular position—all four fingers bent about halfway into a fist, with the thumb free at the side—and says, "Hold it like that for me please."

István does and the doctor starts to wrap a bandage around it. He wraps it until the bandage entirely covers the hand, except for the tips of the fingers and the free thumb, as well as István's wrist and part of his forearm. Then, after putting on latex gloves, the doctor

takes a roll of heavier-looking material that the woman in green has prepared for him by soaking it in a stainless-steel basin of water. The doctor unrolls some of this wet material, which looks like white slimy cloth, and starts to wrap it around István's arm and hand, on top of the bandage that's already there. "Can I ask you a question?" he says, as he does that.

"Yes," István says.

"Where did you go to school?"

"Where did I go to school?" István says, and as he says it he understands why the doctor looks so familiar to him.

"I thought so," the doctor says, when István tells him. "I was there too."

"Oh yeah?" István says.

"We were in the same year, I think," the doctor says.

"Maybe," István says.

"How are you doing?" the doctor asks him, smiling again now in his narrow beard.

"How am I doing?"

"Yeah." The doctor is still winding the slimy material around his wrist and hand, and the separate layers of material have started to merge into one another, forming a single white mass, which the doctor smooths and molds.

"I'm okay," István says.

"What do you do?" the doctor asks. "If you don't mind my asking."

"No," István says. "I don't mind. I was in the army."

"Okay," the doctor says.

He takes a second roll of dripping-wet material from the woman and starts to apply it over the first one.

"Yeah," István says.

"Okay," the doctor says again, his primary focus still on what he's doing.

"Until a few months ago."

"And now?" the doctor asks.

"Not sure," István says.

"Fair enough," the doctor says.

He doesn't ask any more questions, and István doesn't ask him anything about what he's doing. He's obviously a doctor.

That's what he's done with the last decade or whatever—turned himself into a doctor.

Ten years ago he and this doctor were the same, István thinks.

They were the same.

And now the doctor's a doctor and he's... whatever he is.

From the same starting point, this enormous space has opened up between them, is how it feels.

They seem to be on opposite sides of some fundamental divide now.

The plaster is already starting to dry, at least on the surface.

It looks chalkily matte in places.

It feels solid, fixed.

His hand feels trapped in it.

His mother is waiting for him downstairs.

"How is it?" she asks.

He shrugs.

They walk out to her car. It's evening now. The sun is setting beyond the Aldi car park. He must have been in the hospital for five hours or more.

"What happened?" his mother asks him.

"I told you," he says.

"You punched a door?"

"Yes."

"But why?"

"I don't know," he says.

The next morning she says to him, "There's someone I want you to talk to."

"Who?"

She tells him that a friend of hers knows someone at the hospital, in the psychiatric department, who can arrange a meeting with a therapist for him.

He's sitting in the kitchen while she makes his coffee.

"I want you to do that," she says.

He has his first meeting with the therapist a few weeks later. She's a woman of about his mother's age. She asks him to tell her about his

time in Iraq. He tells her something about it. The sort of thing he usually says.

She asks him if he knows what post-traumatic stress disorder is.

"Sort of," he says.

He sees the therapist for an hour or two every week and they talk about some of the things that happened there, especially the incident in which Riki was killed.

She asks him about it in detail.

He tells her in detail what happened. That they were taking water to the Ukrainians. That was the sort of thing they did, when they did anything, he tells her—take water to the Ukrainians. There were the white tankers of water, and also some armored personnel carriers to protect them. Riki was on the machine gun of the first armored personnel carrier, which was the lead vehicle of the convoy. István was on the second, with two or three water tankers between them. He tells her that they were nearing a place called Al-Suwaira, which was where the Ukrainians were, when the explosion happened. The road had been swept for explosive devices earlier in the morning but they must have missed that one. If you're near it, he tells her, not near enough to get hit by the shrapnel but still near it, an explosion isn't just sound. It's pressure as well. It knocks you over, you feel like you've been physically hit. It fucks up your ears. "Sorry," he says—the swear word just slipped out. The therapist nods, acknowledging his apology. He lights another cigarette. You can't hear anything, he tells her. You don't even hear the explosion really. You experience it as pressure, not as sound. And then there's all this smoke everywhere. You can't see anything either. The sense of confusion is hard to describe. The convoy stopped moving. You weren't supposed to do that. You were supposed to keep moving but the lead vehicle had been hit and the road was blocked and there was all this smoke so that the drivers of the other vehicles couldn't see where they were going. Some of the APCs started firing back, he tells her, in the general direction of the incoming fire, or where they thought that was. That was when he realized his ears were fucked—when he couldn't really hear the machine guns, only see their muzzle flashes in the smoke. Anyway, he went through the smoke and helped Riki down from the turret of the lead vehicle and sat on the asphalt with him. For a while Riki was still conscious. He told him that it was going to be okay, even though it probably wasn't and he knew it probably wasn't. He also knew that after that he'd never believe anyone telling *him* it was going to be okay. Or maybe he would believe them. Maybe he'd want to believe them so much that he would, in the way that Riki may have believed him as they sat there on the asphalt. When Riki lost consciousness he wasn't sure if he'd died or what.

"Had he died?" the therapist asks him.

"Yeah," he says.

The therapist asks him how often he thinks about what happened.

"Every day," he says.

"Every day?" she says.

"Yeah," he says. "Literally."

She asks him if he'd be able to write something down every time he thought about it.

"Write something down?"

"Yes."

"What?" he asks.

She tells him that he should write down the thoughts he has and also the feelings he has about them, trying to be as precise as possible.

When he sees her the following week the therapist looks at what he has written.

He sits there, on the low brown armchair, with his face turned to the window while she looks at the sheets of paper with his writing on them.

The window is open. It's late summer now.

The lace curtains move slightly in the draft from the open window.

The therapist says, "You say more than once that you think you could have done more to save Riki's life."

"Yeah," István says, turning his head to her. The word comes out as a sort of throat-clearing sound.

"Do you mind if I ask you some questions about that?"

István shakes his head and lights a cigarette. His cigarettes and lighter are on a low table next to the chair.

The therapist asks him what he thinks he could have done that would have saved Riki's life.

"I don't know. I could have got there quicker," he says.

She asks him how long he waited before leaving his own vehicle and going to Riki's.

He says he doesn't know.

"A minute?" she asks.

"Maybe," he says. "I don't know. Probably less than a minute."

"Probably less than a minute?"

"Yeah."

Does he have any reason to think, she asks, if getting to Riki less than a minute before he did would have made any difference to what happened.

"I don't know," he says.

"But you have no particular reason to think that it would?" she asks.

"No," he says.

"And were there other people closer to Riki than you were?"

"Yes," he says.
"Who?" she asks.
"The drivers of the tankers," he says.
"And yet they didn't go to him."
"No."
"Why not?"
"I don't know. They were frightened. They were civilians. Maybe they weren't used to situations like that."
"They were frightened?"
"Probably."
"And what about in Riki's vehicle?" she asks. "Was there anybody else in Riki's vehicle with him?"
"Yeah, the driver."
"Was he a civilian?"
"No. He was one of us."
"Was he injured?"
"No, actually."
"And yet he didn't do anything."
"He was in shock. That's what they said."
"Still, the fact is he didn't do anything and you did, even though you were much farther away."
István doesn't say anything.
The therapist is looking at him.

After a few weeks she says that she's going to prescribe him something called Seroxat.
"What is that?" he asks.
"It's an antidepressant."
He reaches for his cigarettes.
"I think it might help you," she says. "Would you agree to try it?"
"What is it exactly?" he asks.
She explains that it works by increasing the serotonin levels in his brain. "If the serotonin levels are too low," she tells him, "you might suffer from feelings of depression and anxiety."
He finds it strange to think that it's some chemical in his brain that makes him feel how he does about things. He tells her that.
"Yes, I know what you mean," she says, with a smile. "It does seem strange sometimes. Would you agree to try it?"
He shrugs.
"I think it might help you," she says again. She says that they will monitor how he feels and if he doesn't think it's helping he can stop taking it. "I just think it's worth trying," she says.

He starts taking the Seroxat and soon notices that he is actually feeling different. It's quite hard to say exactly what the difference is. He feels less weighed down by everything or something. He sleeps through the night more.
After a month he and the therapist agree that he should keep taking the pills.
He stops seeing her every week.
They agree that he will come to see her again in six months to talk about how he's doing.

4

TONIGHT IT'S RAINING. He stands under the pert little awning where there's a patch of dry pavement. It tends to be quieter on rainy nights. There's something melancholy about them, the way people hurry along the narrow street, hidden under umbrellas. The traffic squeezes past, showing the falling rain in its headlights.

Later the rain stops.

After about one o'clock there are fewer arrivals.

It's mostly people leaving.

At three he stops letting people in altogether. Not that there are many of them at that hour, especially on a weekday like today. There are sometimes a few. Like these three, still in yesterday's suits, although two of them have lost their ties, approaching loudly along the pavement, seeing the sign and deciding they want to go down.

"We're closed," he says.

One of the young men tries to offer him money—he has what looks like a twenty in his hand and is pushing it at him.

István shakes his head.

The young man with the money persists.

"Can't do it," István says, with his hands in his pockets.

"What can't you do?" the young man says, laughing.

"We're closed," István says again.

"What can't you do? He can't do it," the young man says to the others. "He can't do it."

They're all laughing now.

They walk away.

He watches them go and lights a cigarette.

The last patrons leave at around three thirty. He helps to throw them out. It smells of sweat down there and feels like a sauna after the damp freshness of the street. The lights are on, which makes the place look small. The main stage and the "private" ones at the sides look small and shabby. As he makes his way to Freddy's office, he passes a few of the girls, leaving in tracksuits and raincoats, with earbuds in their ears and don't-even-think-about-talking-to-me expressions on their faces.

He doesn't talk to them.

He finds Freddy in the office. "You weren't around earlier," István says.

Freddy looks tired. "No," he says.

István has no idea where Freddy's from. Not England. He might be an Arab or something. Are there Arabs called Freddy? Something about it doesn't make sense.

Freddy pays him.

"Thanks," István says.

"No problem," Freddy says, in his unplaceable voice.

Pushing the envelope into the inside pocket of his jacket, István goes up the stairs.

It's nearly four. The streets are as empty now as they'll ever be. Which isn't entirely empty, of course. There are still a few people around.

He arrives at Cambridge Circus and starts to walk toward Tottenham Court Road and the night bus home. The illuminated top of Centre Point is visible above the nearer buildings and through the branches of the trees. He knows this walk well. He does it every night that he's working. There are some tatty pubs, and then the huge bookshop with its faulty sign—some of the letters not lit—and after that the dead-end street with the alley at the end.

As he's walking past he notices that something seems to be happening there, in the alley. He stops in the light of the bookshop's display window and stands there for a few seconds trying to work out what it is that he's seeing.

"Help," a voice says.

The voice sounds strangely normal, like someone just neutrally saying the word.

Maybe it's for that reason that he does nothing for a second or two.

Then he starts to move toward it, past the weakly lit display windows of the bookshop.

"Hey!" he shouts.

Which seems to be enough. Two figures separate themselves from the darkness. He sees them as short-lived silhouettes against the end of the alley, where there's the light of some other street.

The alley is actually more of a tunnel.

There's something on the floor there.

It's a person.

"You all right?" he asks.

He stoops and says it again. "You all right?"

He takes out his phone and makes the screen light up and shines it.

The man dislikes the light on his face.

He's quite old. He looks dazed. There's some blood.

"You all right?"

The man, after a few moments, just shakes his head.

István says, "I'm going to call an ambulance. Okay?"

He takes a few steps away with his phone to his ear.

The ambulance arrives ten minutes later. There's the approaching sound of the siren, and then, suddenly, the blue lights at the end of the street.

István smokes a cigarette while the paramedics attach the man to a stretcher.

"Is he going to be okay?" he asks one of them, when the man is in the ambulance.

"Think so," the paramedic says. "You coming?"

It hadn't occurred to István that he would do that. The paramedics, though, are unaware that he doesn't know this man. There wasn't time to explain.

"Up to you," the paramedic says, when he just stands there.

"Where you going?" István asks. "Which hospital?"

When he hears it's the Royal London he says he'll come with them, since it's on his way.

He sits next to the man's head as the ambulance surges and sways through the streets.

Although he seems dazed the man is conscious.

Their eyes meet for a moment.

"What's your name?" the man asks him.

"István," he says.

"Isht-van?" the man repeats.

"Yes."

"You're not English," the man says.

"No," he says.

"Where are you from?" the man asks.

"Hungary," he says.

"I'm also from Hungary," one of the paramedics says, after a few moments, in their own language.

To hear it takes István by surprise. There's something almost disconcerting about it. "Oh yeah?" he says.

The paramedic nods.

Neither of them says anything else until the ambulance arrives at the hospital, where the paramedics take the stretcher out.

Then the man says he wants István's mobile number.

"It's okay," István says.

"Please," the man says.

The Hungarian paramedic writes it down on a scrap of paper and puts it into the man's hand. Then they take him inside, and István walks away. It's five o'clock in the morning, and already fully light on Whitechapel Road.

A few days later the man phones him. At first he has no idea who it is. There's just this voice saying, "Is that István?"

He says it is.

"I'm the poor bastard you saved from being murdered the other night," the man says.

"Oh yeah," István says. He's not sure what else to say. "How you doing?" he asks.

"They tell me I'll live."

"Okay."

"No, I'm fine," the man says. "I wanted to thank you."

"No problem," István says.

He's on the street. There's a lot of noise, lots of people walking in all directions, and it's hard to hear what the man's saying. "Sorry," he says. "Can you say that again?"

"We'd like to invite you to dinner," the man says.

"Dinner?"

"Yeah."

"It's okay," István says, starting to wish that he hadn't picked up when he saw the unknown number on his phone.

The man is quite insistent though, and in the end István accepts the invitation.

When the man suggests Friday, István tells him that he works on Fridays.

"I work on Saturday as well," he tells him.

He has stopped walking. He's on the pedestrianized part of the High Road, in front of Shoe Zone.

"Sunday?" he says, when the man asks him which day would suit him. "Or Monday?"

They settle on Monday, at seven.

"Do you have a wife?" the man asks. "Or a girlfriend?"

"No," István says.

"Well, just bring yourself, then," the man says.

On Monday evening he takes the Tube in. It's twenty stops from Gants Hill. He's on the train for nearly an hour.

On the pavement in front of Holland Park Station he looks at his pocket A–Z. He has some trouble orienting himself, and then he takes some wrong turns, but eventually he finds the place. It's an enormous apartment block, made of red brick. It takes up the whole street. It *is* the street, effectively. Above each entrance, stenciled on glass, are the numbers of the apartments to which it provides access. He finds the right one and presses the doorbell, which is a small brass button.

"Come in!" a voice says before he's even had a chance to explain who he is, and he makes his way through the silent entrance hall to the elevator at the far end.

The elevator ascends, slowly and quietly. It has wood paneling and dark blue carpet, the same carpet that was in the entrance hall. It also has a polished wooden outer door that you have to push open yourself when you arrive at your floor. It takes him a moment to work that out, and then he's on a landing, where there are the doors of several apartments, one of them open.

The man, standing in the open doorway, is somewhere in his mid-sixties probably.

Thickset and not tall, he's smiling, and exuding a strong smell of expensive perfume. "István," he says.

"Hi," István says.

"Mervyn," the man says, introducing himself.

István nods.

"Come in," the man says. He still has some yellow bruising on his face.

In the entrance hall he asks István if he can take his jacket. Once that's done he leads him farther into the apartment, into a living room where he invites him to sit down.

István sits on one of two opposing sofas in the middle of the room.

There's a TV on, showing what seems to be golf.

The man asks him if he wants a drink.

"Sure, thanks," István says.

"I'm having a G and T," the man says. "Is that all right?"

"Sure, thanks," István says again.

"Fine," the man says, and addresses himself to some sort of drinks tray.

There's the sound of ice ringing into glasses, and a ripple of applause from the TV as some golfer succeeds in doing something.

"Do you follow golf?" the man asks, with his back to István.

"No," István says.

"No," the man repeats. There's something about him, István thinks, something that doesn't quite fit with these surroundings—with the pictures on the walls and shelves full of books and polished surfaces with framed photos and other objects on them.

The man turns with the drinks in his hands. "Fair enough," he says, handing one of them to István.

Having done that, he picks up a remote control and kills the TV's sound. Then he sits down on the sofa opposite. "So," he says. "Cheers."

"Cheers," István echoes.

They taste their drinks. They're mixed very strong.

Even so, the man asks if István's is strong enough.

István just nods.

"I don't see the point of a gin and tonic that hardly tastes of gin," the man says.

"Sure."

István's eyes wander to the TV, which is still showing silent pictures.

"The Memorial," the man says, noticing.

"Yeah?"

"The Memorial Tournament. In America. Muirfield."

"Okay."

"You know who he is?" the man asks, as the silent TV shows a close-up.

"Tiger Woods," István says.

"Yes."

They're both looking at the screen now.

"Phenomenal player," the man says.

"Yeah," István says.

They watch the golf for a few minutes, the man telling István something about who the players are and what the situation is while István takes sips of his drink and pretends to be interested.

"What do you do?" the man suddenly and unexpectedly asks.

"Do?"

The man nods, lifting his drink to his mouth.

"Work?"
"Yeah."
"Sort of... security?" István says, not quite sure how to put it.
"Oh yeah?"
"That sort of thing."
"I'm not surprised to hear that," the man says, "actually. The way you waded in so fearlessly the other night. You were an absolute hero."
"Well."
"I mean it."
"Thanks," István says.
"Thank *you*."
There's a moment of mild awkwardness.
"No problem," István says.
"So what d'you do exactly?" the man asks, leaning back and stretching his free arm, the one that isn't holding his drink, along the back of the sofa. "What sort of work?"
"Door work mainly."
"Okay."
"You know."
"Yes, I do," the man says, as if it is in fact something that he has some particular knowledge about.
"Yeah?"
"Sure. Where d'you work?"
"At the moment at this place in Soho," István says.
The man smiles. "What's that like?"
"It's okay."
"What sort of place is it?"
"It's... you know." István is unsure how to describe it.
"Nudie show?" the man suggests.
"Something like that. You know. Pole dancing. Whatever."
"Sure."
"Private dances."
"Yeah."
"I'm not really into that myself," István says.
"No?" The man seems interested to hear this, and István slightly regrets saying it in case it gives him the wrong idea.
"It's just not my thing."
"Okay."
"I don't have a problem with it."
"No," the man agrees.
"If people enjoy it..."
"People do."
"Sure. It's okay," István says.
"Which place actually?"
István says the name of the place.
"Oh yes."
"You know it?"
"Not really."
"It's okay," István says again.
"I know *of* it," the man says.
István has another sip of his drink.
The man tells him that he has a private security agency and that, if István is interested, he might be able to find some work for him. "Maybe more interesting work than what you're doing now."
"Yeah?"
"Maybe."
István waits for him to say more about it.
He doesn't.
They sort of drift back into watching the golf again and then, during a hiatus in the action, while the screen is showing a shot of the wind-rippled surface of a lake, the man asks, "Where you from, István? It's István, right?"
"Yeah."
"Where you from?"
"Hungary."
"What's that like?"
István isn't sure what to say. He isn't sure what sort of answer the man is looking for. He says what he tends to say when people ask

him that question—"It's okay."

"You go back much?"

"Sometimes."

"Visit family?"

"Yeah."

"You must miss it," the man says.

"Yeah. Sometimes."

"How long have you been here?"

"London?"

"Yeah."

"Two years," István says. "About two years."

"Like it?"

"Yeah."

From the end of the hallway there's the sound of someone entering the apartment—the front door opening and shutting and a jingle of keys.

"My wife," the man explains. With what might be an involuntary nervous gesture, he smooths his silkily corrugated hair with his hand. Or at least his cupped hand follows the line of his skull. His hair, which was obviously once dark but is now mostly silvery gray, doesn't need smoothing.

His wife appears a minute later, dressed like she's been at work in an office.

"This is István," the man says.

István stands to shake her hand.

She's a tall woman, maybe even slightly taller than her somewhat stocky husband.

They eat at a table in the large kitchen. It's a takeaway, Indian. There's red wine. They cover some of the same ground again, with the man's wife asking the questions now.

Where is István from.

How long has he been in London.

Does he like it here.

The man seems happy to let his wife do most of the talking. He eats slowly and methodically, serving small amounts onto his plate from the foil dishes in the middle of the table and then equally slowly and methodically transferring them to his mouth.

"So where do *you* live?" his wife asks István.

"Ilford," István says.

"I don't know it," she says, as if she actually might know it, as if it were only a matter of chance that she didn't live there herself. "What's it like?"

"It's all right," István says.

She waits for more.

"You know," he says.

She shakes her head.

"It's quite mixed," he says.

"Mixed?"

"Yeah."

"How did you end up living there?" she asks him.

"I knew some people. Some people who already lived there."

"Hungarians?"

"Yeah."

She asks him if he has his own place.

He explains that he lives in a house share with quite a few other people.

The man asks if it's okay if he finishes the aloo gobi. His wife says it's okay with her, and the man's eyes turn to István, who says, "Yeah."

The man spoons the remaining aloo gobi onto his plate.

"It's really nice," István says, meaning the food.

"It is, isn't it?" the man says. "It's from a place called the Royal Tandoori. Old-school Indian place. Been there forever."

He pours more wine for them all.

His wife wants István to describe what happened the night he saved her husband.

István tries to do that.

He says he was on his way home from work, as usual, and noticed some activity in the alley.

"The one next to Foyles," her husband puts in. "You know."

With her eyes still on István, she nods.

"So yeah," István says. "I saw something happening there and went to see what it was. That's it."

"So you scared them off?" she asks.

"They legged it at the sight of him," the man says.

"Something like that," István agrees.

What the man was doing there at four in the morning hasn't been explained, and István doesn't ask.

He leaves at about ten o'clock.

The man sees him to the door. As István puts his jacket on he again mentions the possibility of finding him some work through this agency that he apparently has. "Do call me if you're interested," he says, patting István on the shoulder.

"Yeah, okay," István says.

The man stands in the open doorway while István waits for the elevator.

It takes about half a minute to arrive, during which István just stands there with the man looking at him from the door.

"Take care," the man says when it arrives.

He goes running on Wanstead Flats. Waiting at the traffic lights on Aldersbrook Road, he jogs on the spot, and then does a full circuit of the Flats, open-mouthed and staring straight ahead. He finishes at the bottom of the steps that go up to the pedestrian bridge over the North Circular. Still flushed and sweaty, he stands on the bridge, six lanes of traffic underneath it. It's dusk and the traffic has its lights on. He walks home through dull streets of terraced houses. This isn't the kind of life he imagined having when he moved here. It was quite fun at first—or at least it was new and different, and he was able to feel that he was starting again, which was something he wanted. He hadn't imagined, though, that after two years he would still be living like this. Sharing a small house with half a dozen other people. Listening to the trains passing outside the window all night. Working fifty hours a week and still not having any money left at the end of the month, and with no prospect of anything except more of the same.

A few days later, he phones the man and says that he is interested in what he said, about him maybe finding some work for him. "What would I need to do?" he asks. "Exactly."

"We should meet and talk about it," the man says.

They meet at a pub near his apartment and he explains that his agency provides close personal protection to VIPs, celebrities, and high-net-worth individuals. "Bodyguards, in the vernacular," he says.

"Okay," István says.

The pub has a terrace in front and they're sitting at a table under the leafy branches of a tree. Mervyn, like most of the men there, is wearing an open-necked shirt and sunglasses. Those red trousers again, and what seem to be Gucci loafers. The same strong-smelling perfume. It's midweek, early afternoon. Facing him across the wooden table, István feels dull-headed—he took the Tube in immediately after waking up.

"Interested?"

"Sure," István says.

"You'll make a lot more, potentially, than whatever you're making now."

"Okay."

"I don't know what you're making now."

When István tells him, and even though he exaggerates the amount, Mervyn makes a dismissive movement with his hand. He says there's the potential to make up to fifty pounds an hour from close protection work, depending on the qualifications and experience of the individual, and also on their personal qualities.

"You told me you were in the army," he says.

"Yes."

"Well, that's an excellent start."

They talk a bit about István's army experience and then Mervyn says, "You got an SIA license? You'll need one."

"What is that?" István asks, lighting another cigarette.

"Security Industry Authority license," Mervyn explains. "It's a formality really."

"Okay."

"Actually, you should have one to do what you're doing at that strip club."

"Working on the door?"

"Yes."

"Well," István says. "It's sort of informal."

"Yeah, that was my assumption. You don't have a criminal record?"

"Here?"

"Or at home. In Hungary."

"I actually do," István says.

"Here?"

"No."

"At home?"

"Yeah."

"Oh?"

"Yeah," István says.

"What?"

István tells him.

"The man died?" Mervyn asks.

"Yeah," István says. "Yeah, he did." He feels unexpectedly shaken. It's been years since he's talked about this, and talking about it now he understands, as if for the first time, the extent to which it has affected his whole life since then.

Seeing that he's upset, Mervyn pats him on the shoulder. "It's okay," he says.

István nods.

"How old were you?" Mervyn asks him.

"Fifteen," István says.

"You were a minor?"

"Yeah."

"It should be all right, then," Mervyn says. "Nothing else?"

"No," István says.

It turns out, though, that to get the SIA license he first needs to do a two-week training course in close-protection techniques that costs more than a thousand pounds.

When István says he doesn't have that Mervyn offers to lend him the money.

"No," István says.

"Why not?"

"No," István says again.

And again Mervyn says, "Why not?" He takes off his sunglasses. "It's the least I can do," he says. "After what you did for me. You might have saved my life. I'm saying I'll lend you the money, that's all. You do some work for me after you've got the license and you'll be in a position to pay it back. Don't worry about that."

István doesn't say anything.

"Don't worry about that," Mervyn says again. "I'll get my money back. And then some."

The course is in Romford. He takes the Overground and it's a short walk from there. He has to set an alarm for six thirty and it feels weird to be up so early. To be *starting* the day at that hour. He isn't used to it anymore and he struggles to stay focused as he stares at a well-built man in an Under Armour T-shirt standing next to a whiteboard and talking to them about physical intervention and when it is and is not justified.

There are twenty or thirty of them in the room, at these little desks. At some points during the day, it feels unpleasantly like one of those dreams where you're at school again. Most of the others are sort of like him. About half of them are English and the rest are foreigners, mainly from Eastern Europe. There are three or four women. Otherwise it's men. He's one of the older ones.

The course has three modules: "Working in the Private Security Industry," "Working as a Close Protection Operative," and "Conflict Management." Subjects covered include first aid and defibrillator training—standing around in a circle with one of them being "the subject"—as well as potentially more interesting things like evasive-driving techniques ("If you can't call for help or reasonably get to a safe area, then you must lose your pursuers on the road") and anti-ambush training ("In potentially hostile environments we need to utilize some specific skills to prevent or survive an ambush, these are sometimes referred to as *Protective Intelligence* skills, or situational and tactical awareness skills"). Toward the end of the second week there's also a short introduction to firearms which some of the others seem to think is exciting.

He listens to them talking about it at lunch one day. A few of them have gone for lunch together at a place near the station. "Shooters tomorrow," one of them says, as István squirts ketchup and then tucks into his Full English. There's a rumor that a special instructor will be coming in with a selection of handguns for them to look at and for a while they talk about who already has experience with firearms.

"What about you?" someone asks István, who hasn't said anything yet.

István nods, eating.

"Yeah?"

He explains that he was in the army. They have questions about the weapons he used.

He tells them it was mostly the AK-63...

"You mean forty-seven?" one of the others says.

István shakes his head. "No, sixty-three," he explains, with his mouth full. "It's basically the same as the classic AK though. It's a variant. Made in Hungary."

"What's it like?" someone asks.

He shrugs. "It's a decent weapon."

Disappointingly for most of them, the firearms session turns out to involve looking at pictures on a screen and talking about how to deal with a situation where someone *else* pulls a gun. Do what they tell you, seems to be the main advice. Don't try to be a hero.

At the end of the second week they do the tests. He has trouble sleeping the night before. Luckily the tests are easy. There are multiple-choice questions where two of the four answers are obviously wrong so you always have a fifty-fifty shot even if you don't know. Most of them pass the first time, and someone organizes a meal at the Romford Nando's to celebrate.

When he tells him that he passed the test, Mervyn takes him to lunch at the pub near his apartment. They have a sort of fancy fish and chips, with white wine.

"Well done," Mervyn says.

"Thanks," István says. He says he hopes he'll be able to pay him back soon.

"I'm sure you will," Mervyn says. "Of course, it's not just about having the license," he says. "Personal qualities matter as well. For the sort of work we do. The higher-end work."

"Personal qualities?"

"Yeah," Mervyn says, having a sip of wine. He lifts the dripping bottle from the thing it's in and tops them both up.

They're inside this time, in the dining area of the pub, which involves wood paneling and waiters in long white aprons.

It's not particularly like any pub that István is familiar with.

"Personal qualities," Mervyn says. "You know."

While István struggles with the intricately bony carcass on his plate Mervyn says, "For the higher-end kind of work it's not just about your ability to deal with dangerous situations. It's not just about being tough. It's more than that. You've got to have the right... You've got to be able to conduct yourself in a certain way. These people are used to a certain kind of behavior. Do you see what I mean?"

"Yeah," István says. "I think so."

"Yeah?"

István nods.

"You've got to present yourself in a particular way."

"Yeah."

"It's very important."

"Okay."

"It's partly just the look," Mervyn says. "You have to dress properly. Do you own a suit?" he asks.

"No," István admits.

Mervyn smiles. "Well, let's start with that, then."

After lunch they walk over to Barkers on Kensington High Street.

Mervyn says István needs a suit and a few shirts and a plain dark blue tie.

They move among the racks of suits.

When they have two or three options, Mervyn makes István try them on and waits on the other side of the door in the fitting rooms to see how they look.

"That's nice," he says, when István emerges in one of them. "Turn around."

István does.

"Yeah, you need double vents," Mervyn says. "Might need to let it out a bit too. Now let's look at some shirts."

When he takes out his wallet to pay for the things István shows unease.

Mervyn waves it away. "I'm thinking of it as an investment," he says. "After all, I get twenty percent, don't I? I'll get it all back in a month, if this works out. Have you got any just normal socks?" he asks.

"Normal socks?"

"I mean not those things. Not sports socks. Plain black socks. Or dark blue."

"Not really," István says.

"Well, get some."

"Okay."

"What about shoes? Proper shoes."

István shakes his head.

They go to Russell & Bromley and buy a pair of simple black leather shoes.

Then Mervyn suggests a pint.

"You need some polishing," he says, when they're installed at a table on the leafy terrace of his posh local.

"Yeah?"

Mervyn nods. "Yeah," he says, and to that end he proposes that István spends a few days with him.

István presents himself at the Holland Park apartment the next morning. He's wearing the new suit, as Mervyn told him to, with one of the shirts and the dark blue tie. "Very smart," Mervyn says, and when he has finished his coffee, they take the lift down.

"You've got a driving license?" he asks.

"Yeah," István says.

Mervyn hands him the keys of the Jaguar.

"Where are we going?" István asks.

"Just start driving," Mervyn says. "I'll tell you."

Mervyn himself sits in the back.

"It's weird," István says, "driving on this side."

"What? Oh yes. Have you done that before?"

"No," István says.

"Well, please be careful."

Mervyn directs him as they drive through the streets of London, along Kensington High Street and then via Knightsbridge to Hyde Park Corner, where he instructs him to turn onto Park Lane. These are parts of London that István doesn't know. The air-conditioning is on in the Jaguar. It's a hot summer day and on the other side of the windows people are dressed as if they're on vacation.

"I see the girls go by dressed in their summer clothes," Mervyn murmurs, while they wait at a traffic light.

"Yeah," István says, not getting the reference.

They're in smaller streets now and a few minutes later Mervyn tells him to park when he can, and then, when he has found a place, to put money in the meter.

It seems that Mervyn has a meeting on the street where they are, in one of the tall brick houses.

"Someone who's interested in my services," he explains.

István just nods.

He waits outside, first sitting in the parked Jaguar with the windows open, and then standing in the warm shade on the other side of the street, smoking a cigarette.

He's too hot in the suit, even in the shade.

The tie pinches his throat.

He loosens it and pops the top button.

When Mervyn sees it he says, "Why did you do that?"

"Was really tight on my neck," István says.

"You mustn't do that," Mervyn tells him.

"Sorry," István says, doing the button up again and moving the tie back into place.

Mervyn isn't wearing a tie himself. He's wearing his usual open-necked shirt and red trousers. He says, "Do you feel comfortable dressed like that?"

István shrugs.

"Do you?"

"No, not really," István admits.

"It shows," Mervyn says. "I want you to wear that suit every day for a week. I don't want you to wear anything else for a week."

"Okay."

"Sleep in it if you want to. You need to feel comfortable in it," Mervyn says. "More important, you need to *look* like you feel comfortable in it."

"Okay," István says.

He drives Mervyn to a few more places and then they have lunch at a smart restaurant.

"Don't eat so fast," Mervyn says, smiling. "What's the hurry?"

"Sorry," István says.

"What's the hurry?"

"Sure."

"I don't want you to finish eating before I've finished eating," Mervyn says. "Okay?"

"Okay."

Mervyn eats very slowly.

István makes himself eat slowly too.

"I want you to practice eating slowly," Mervyn says.

"Okay," István says.

Later Mervyn says, "Try not to move your hands when you talk."

"All right."

"I want you to be very still."

"Okay."

"Keep your hands by your sides."

"Okay."

"Do you have a lighter?" Mervyn asks.

"Yeah."

"Yes," Mervyn says.

"Yes," István says.

Mervyn has a cigarette in his hand. He puts it in his mouth and waits for István to light it. "No, move more slowly," he says. "Do it again. More slowly. Put it back in your pocket and start again."

István puts the lighter back in his pocket and then takes it out again, moving more slowly, and lights the cigarette.

"Thank you," Mervyn says.

"No problem."

"Don't say that."

"Okay."

"Don't say anything unless I speak to you first. Unless I ask you a question."

"Okay."

The next day they eat in a smart restaurant again, a different one. István tries to eat slowly. "That's better," Mervyn says. He says, "Often you'll find yourself in surroundings like this, with the kind of principal who uses the premium service."

"Yeah," István says.

"Yes."

"Yes."

"You need to fit in."

"Okay."

"Usually you won't be eating with them, of course."

"No, I know."

"You won't be sitting at the table with them."

"No, I know."

"But you'll be there."

"Yeah."

"Yes."

"Yes."

"So you need to fit in. You need to fit in with everything else in their lives. That's what they want. They're people with serious money and they want someone who fits in with everything else in their lives."

"Okay," István says.

When they arrive back at the apartment Mervyn invites him up for a drink.

While Mervyn busies himself at the drinks tray István looks at things. The pictures on the walls. The objects on the shelves.

Mervyn hands him a gin and tonic in a heavy glass and then flops down on one of the sofas and puts his feet—he has shed the Gucci loafers at some point—on an upholstered footstool.

Pointing the remote, he ignites the TV.

It's golf again.

"The Open," Mervyn explains.

"Yeah?"

"What Americans call the British Open."

"Okay."

István sits on an easy chair of rose-colored velvet from where he has a view of the screen. Mervyn sometimes explains what's happening—who the players are, what the situation is. It's surprisingly interesting once you know something about it. There's a surprising tension to it, though the moments of tension, most often someone attempting to make an important putt, are followed by polite applause and interspersed with tranquil shots of trees and small lakes in a way that's quite pleasant.

When Mervyn's wife arrives home from work he makes a drink for her too, and second ones for himself and István.

"You look very smart," she says to István.

He stood up when she came in and is now sort of hovering while Mervyn is engaged at the drinks tray.

"Thanks," he says.

"Got a new job?" she asks, sitting down herself and squeezing one of her stockinged feet.

"In a manner of speaking," Mervyn says, although the question wasn't addressed to him.

"Oh yes?"

"We're going to try and get István some more lucrative work," Mervyn says, handing out the G&Ts. "Hopefully."

"I'll drink to that," his wife says.

"Are you going to stay for supper?" Mervyn asks István.

"Is that okay?"

"I wouldn't ask if it wasn't."

"Okay," István says. "Thanks."

While Mervyn watches the golf, István offers to help his wife in the kitchen.

"Mervyn's been grooming you, has he?" she says.

"What's that?" István asks.

She laughs. "I heard about your shopping trip," she says.

"Yeah. Yes."

"That must have been very embarrassing for you."

"Yeah, a bit," István admits, laughing uneasily himself.

He's sitting at the kitchen table in his suit, slicing an onion for her.

She must be about fifty-five. She's quite attractive, he thinks.

"You do look smart though," she says.

"Okay."

"Which is important."

"Yeah, I know."

"If you want to get ahead."

He passes her the board with the onion on it and she says, "I'm impressed. Did you used to help your mother in the kitchen or something?"

"Yeah, sometimes," he says.

"How sweet."

As the onion starts to hiss in the pan she asks him to make her another gin and tonic and he goes through to the living room, where Mervyn is still embedded in the sofa with his feet up and the golf on the TV.

He looks tired.

István says that his wife wants another G&T.

"Sure," Mervyn says. "Everything's there. And make another for yourself if you want."

"Do you want another?" István asks.

"I don't think I will, thanks," Mervyn says.

István leaves at nine o'clock and arrives home at half past ten.

Mervyn starts to put him up for work with his agency and soon he's making quite a lot more money. Within a few months he has repaid Mervyn what he owes him. Not long after that he's able to leave the house share where he's lived for two years and move into a new apartment. It's in Stratford, in a modern high-rise building. When he moves in, the building has only just opened. It has those mailboxes that look like safe deposit boxes in the entrance hall, and an elevator that doesn't seem to move as it takes him up to the twelfth floor.

The apartment itself is small and austerely furnished. There's a bedroom with tough gray carpet, and some chrome-plated free weights lying around. There's a windowless bathroom with an excellent shower. There's a balcony with a single uncomfortable-looking aluminium chair. The balcony faces west and sometimes half-recognizable landmarks of central London are visible in the haze.

He has his morning coffee out there. Brightness from the bland sky brings out pale shadows on the balcony and the wind shakes the improvised rattan partition that screens it from the neighbors'. He has never actually seen the neighbors. He just hears their voices sometimes.

5

He goes running in Battersea Park, his feet stirring the leaves that sometimes lie thick on the paths under the trees. He has a distinct memory of how, as a child, he used to like running through leaves like that, through heaps of dry brown leaves. Why was that so enjoyable? Something about the way the leaves didn't impede you, but made a lot of noise.

A dog makes some pigeons take to the air. It's one of the pack of them that the professional walkers are out with every morning. Until he lived in this part of London he didn't even know that was a job people did, walking other people's dogs.

He arrives back at the house with an island of sweat on his T-shirt front. The paved forecourt is separated from the public street by tall iron railings partly overgrown with wisteria that is starting to wither now. He pushes open the gate. The windows of the house reflect the gray day like the surface of a pond. He doesn't use the main door. There's another door at the side. There's even a discreet sign, with an image of a pointing hand, and the words tradesmen's entrance. He lets himself in there and walks up the service stairs to his small apartment at the top.

He has a shower.

He shaves.

He puts on his suit and tie.

It's nearly nine when he brings the Mercedes around from the mews and waits for Mr. or Mrs. Nyman to need him.

He used to do quite a lot of work for them through the agency. Then they offered him a full-time job as their security driver.

Mr. Nyman is in his sixties. His wife is much younger, probably about forty. They seem to live quite separate lives and it's fairly unusual for István to drive them anywhere together. Mr. Nyman in fact spends much of his time at their country house in Hertfordshire, and usually travels there by helicopter, so that István's job for the most part involves driving Mrs. Nyman around London.

"Tell me about yourself István," she says to him one day.

"About myself?"

"Yes."

"What do you want to know?" he asks.

"Just something about you," she says.

He's at the wheel of the Mercedes, in slow-moving traffic on Piccadilly.

"Karl says you were in the army," Mrs. Nyman says.

"Yes."

"How was that?" she asks.

"How was that?" The traffic is moving again and he has to focus on it for a moment.

"Yes," she says.

"It was..." He wonders what to say, what sort of answer she's looking for. "It was okay," he says.

"It was okay?"

"Yes."

"What does that mean?" she asks.

"What does it mean?"

"Yes."

"It means... it was okay."

"What do you mean okay? What does that actually mean?" she says. "When you say *It was okay* you're not actually saying anything, are you?"

"I'm not sure what you want to know," he says.

"I want to know what it was like. Stop being so fucking evasive," she says. "Are you always like this?"

"Like what?"

"Like this. Evasive."

Their eyes meet in the mirror.

She's obviously sort of joking and he doesn't say anything else, he just smiles at her.

For a few minutes they travel in silence.

Then she says, still apparently joking, or half joking, "Does Karl ask you about me?"

"No," he says.

"What I do?"
"No."
"Who I see?"
"No."
"You wouldn't tell me anyway, would you? I mean if he did."
István doesn't say anything.
"I don't know if I can trust you," she says.
"Sure, you can trust me," he says.
"You see, it's the way you say things like that that makes me think I can't."
"The way I say things like?"
"*Shooor, you can trrrust me*," she imitates, in a thickly accented voice.
He laughs, even though he actually feels slightly hurt at the way she made him sound.
In fact, as far as he can tell, she doesn't do anything that she might want to hide from her husband, except drink too much sometimes, and he must know about that anyway.
She lights a cigarette, even though she's not supposed to smoke in the car.
"You don't mind?" she says, a few seconds later.
He just shakes his head.

The next day she says, "I'm sorry about yesterday."
"That's okay," he says.
"I was drunk," she says.
"Don't worry about it."
"I'm sorry," she says.
"Don't worry about it," he says again.
"Thank you for being so understanding," she says.
They stop at some traffic lights on Park Lane.
He's taking her to lunch with a friend of hers.
"Would you say you're non-judgmental?" she asks him, as they move off again.
"Non-judgmental?"
"Yes." She lights a cigarette and then lowers the window a little. "Would you?"
"I don't know," he says.
"I think you are," she says.
"Okay."
When they arrive at the restaurant where she's meeting her friend he asks her if she knows how long she'll be.
She says she doesn't.
He drives around trying to find somewhere to park. The wipers are going. Through the speckled windshield he looks at the wet streets of Covent Garden.
He leaves the Mercedes at the place on Shelton Street and then stands in Pret on St. Martin's Lane, shaking off his small umbrella and looking at the sandwiches.
He sits in the window, on a tall stool, with a BLT.
When he's finished it he takes his time over his Americano, watching people walk past in the rain outside.
Behind him there's the noise of the lunchtime Pret.
He's not the only man wearing a suit. There are quite a few of them in there, he notices, turning his head for a moment. That was one of the things that struck him about London when he first arrived here, central London in particular—how many people you see wearing suits. The streets are full of them. He'd never seen anything like it.
On the sidewalk outside he puts up his umbrella.
He's not sure what to do now. He has to stay in the area. It might be hours though. A lot of the job is just waiting like this.

"We were at school together," Mrs. Nyman says, when he picks her up at the Ivy an hour and a half later. She's talking about the friend she's just had lunch with, who's apparently an artist of some sort.
"She's really special," Mrs. Nyman says. "I'm trying to get her a proper show."
"Okay."
"She's not very good at self-promotion."
"Okay."
"She doesn't seem to understand how important that aspect of it is."
"No."
"Anyway, I'm trying to get her a proper show."
"Okay."
"Karl knows some people. People with money to invest in that sort of thing."

"Sure."

She starts doing something on her phone, messaging someone or something—he hears the little popping sounds as she types with the thumb of the same hand that's holding the phone while using the other hand to lift the cigarette to her mouth.

She says she wants to get him something, something to make up for how obnoxious she was when she was drunk the other day. *Obnoxious*—that's the word she uses. He's not familiar with it. It's fairly obvious what it means though.

"It's all right," he says.

"No, I want to," she says.

"Seriously, it's all right," he says.

"Let me do this," she says.

They're in Hermès on Bond Street and she's holding a tie, holding it up to him to see how it looks.

"No," he says.

"Please."

"No," he says again. "Thank you."

He moves away, to a position nearer the door.

She spends another twenty minutes or so in the shop, looking at things while a sales assistant follows her around, answering her questions and passing things to another more junior sales assistant to set aside when she decides she wants them.

Still waiting near the door, István notices that the tie she wanted to get him is among the things she pays for at the end.

They're in the Mercedes again when she hands him the stiff orange envelope. She leans forward and it appears next to his shoulder.

He hesitates before taking it.

There's this moment when she's holding it out and he hasn't taken it yet, when he doesn't know if he's going to take it or not.

He takes it.

"Thanks," he says.

She doesn't say anything.

He puts it on the passenger seat and asks where they're going.

It's not actually the first present that she's given him. There have been other things.

One day when he's driving her somewhere, she tells him to stop.

He pulls over.

"Switch off the engine," she says.

He does.

"Come and sit in the back with me," she says.

"Why?" he asks.

"Because I want you to," she says.

He gets out of the car and gets in again in the back.

It feels strange to be in the back, to see the world from that position. To see his own empty seat in the front.

"Yes?" he says.

"You know I've got the hots for you, don't you," she says.

The directness of it does surprise him.

"Yeah?" he says.

"*Yeah?*" she imitates, pitching her voice very low, and making him sound like some sort of idiot.

He smiles at her.

"Yeah," she says.

"Okay," he says, after quite a long silence.

"Why don't you kiss me?" she says.

"I'm not sure that would be such a good idea," he says.

"That's a really annoying thing to say."

"Still."

They just sit there for a few seconds.

"I'm sorry," he says.

"Don't say that."

"Okay."

"Don't say that," she says again.

"Okay."

"Take me home," she says.

"Okay," he says.

He drives her home in silence.

Soon after that they start having sex together, usually when her husband is out of London.

When they have sex it's always in his apartment, at the top of the house, which is only accessible via the tradesmen's entrance and the service stairs.

"Does your husband know about this?" he asks her, after she's visited him up there a few times. He's started to wonder if she and her husband have some sort of "arrangement."

"Karl?"

"Yes."

"No," she says. "Of course not."

"I'm not the first though, am I?"

"The first what?"

"You know what I mean."

"Do you mean am I in the habit of fucking the help?" she says.

"The help?"

"You don't know that phrase?"

"No," he says.

"It's American," she says. "It's what they call their servants. It maintains an illusion of equality."

"Okay."

"You're the first," she says.

"Okay."

"I hope you're flattered."

"Sure," he says.

She puts her clothes on.

"See you tomorrow," she says.

"Yeah," he says.

He works out that she would only have been about twenty-five when she married her husband, who would have been fiftyish then.

She says it's been "years" since she and her husband have had sex.

"And there was nobody else?" he asks her.

"No," she says.

It might be true, he thinks. There's something surprisingly innocent about her.

He meets his friend Claudiu in a pub near the Cheyne Walk house. It's an unexpectedly scruffy place for the area, mainly frequented by builders who are working there, it seems. It's one of those pubs without music. There's just the sound of people talking, and sometimes laughing.

"How are you?" Claudiu asks.

"Yeah, okay," István says.

For a while they talk about the old days in east London.

István asks after some of the others from that first house share. Claudiu is still in touch with a few of them. Tibi and Botond, Jerzy and the Lithuanian. They used to go out on Friday nights sometimes, to the General Havelock, or the Faces, or into the West End. They talk about some particularly memorable occasions, laugh about them.

"Those were fun times," Claudiu says fondly.

István shrugs, sort of agreeing.

Claudiu himself doesn't go out on the pull these days. He has a girlfriend now, he says.

She's Irish apparently. She works in an office.

When he asks István about his own situation, whether he's seeing anyone, István wonders whether to say anything about Helen Nyman. "Sort of," he says.

"Sort of?"

István nods.

"What do you mean?" Claudiu asks.

István tells him what's been happening.

"Your employer's wife?"

"Yes."

"You're shagging her?"

"Yes."

"How did that happen?" Claudiu wants to know.

István suggests they step outside for a smoke, and standing on the sidewalk in front of the pub he describes what happened in the Mercedes that day, when she told him she had "the hots" for him, and then how she appeared at his apartment a day or two later and he thought something like *Actually, why not?*

They laugh.

"What's she like?" Claudiu asks him.

"She's okay," István says.

"Okay?"
"Yeah."
"Yeah?" Claudiu is smiling at him.
"How d'you mean?"
"You know what I mean," Claudiu says.
István sort of laughs again. "Yeah, she's all right," he says.
"How old is she?"
"Forty," István says. "About forty."
The fact is, he quite enjoys her visits. The sex is undeniably intense and exciting. Partly it's that there's this feeling of transgression, he thinks, the feeling that they shouldn't be doing this. And that feeling is if anything intensified by the fact that he doesn't actually find her particularly attractive, that he doesn't even particularly want to have sex with her. In other words, the fact that he doesn't particularly want to have sex with her somehow makes the sex more intense and exciting. He finds himself looking forward to it sometimes. And actually he does find her more attractive than he did at first. It's interesting the way that happens, the way a certain amount of physical familiarity, of seeing someone every day, can make them seem more attractive. That has definitely happened with her.

Every morning he takes her son, Thomas, to school.
Thomas is usually late.
István waits in the idling limousine while leaves fall from the plane trees of Embankment Gardens.
Finally the front door of the house opens and Thomas appears in his school uniform tweed jacket and tie and walks across the stone paving of the forecourt.
"Morning," István says, when Thomas opens the door of the Mercedes.
"Morning," Thomas says.
"How are you?" István asks him.
"I'm okay," Thomas says.
It only takes a few minutes to drive to the school, which is on Cadogan Square, in a tall red-brick house not dissimilar to the one that the Nymans live in on Cheyne Walk.
After dropping him there István tops up the Mercedes at the Texaco station on Sloane Avenue and then makes his way back to Cheyne Walk and waits for Helen Nyman to appear, usually after her personal trainer leaves at about ten.

There are things that happen at the same time every week. Every Tuesday, for instance, he takes her to Cottesmore Gardens in Kensington, to a modest white house with a tree in front of it. As the autumn wears on and the leaves fall from the tree the front of the house seems more exposed.
She's always in there for exactly an hour.
"You probably want to know what happens in there," she says one day, as they drive away afterward.
"If you want to tell me," he says.
"It's my therapist," she says.
"Okay," he says.
They arrive at Kensington High Street.
"What do you think of that?" she asks.
"What do I think?"
"Yes."
"I don't know," he says.
He wonders, as he drives, whether to tell her that he was in therapy himself for a while. It's not something he normally tells people.
When he does she seems surprised.
He says so.
"I am," she admits.
"Why?" he asks.
"I don't know."
"You didn't think we had that sort of thing in Eastern Europe?" he says, smiling at her in the mirror.
"It's not that."
"Okay."
"Tell me more," she says.
"What do you mean?"
"Do you want to tell me about it?" she asks.
"What about it?"
"If you don't want to talk about it," she says.
"I don't mind talking about it," he says.
He tells her that it was after his time in the army.
"I thought it might be that," she says.

"It was just for a few months."
"Did it help?"
"Yeah," he says, "I suppose."
"So this was in Hungary?" she asks, apparently not wanting to leave the subject now.
"Yes," he says.
"What sort of therapy was it?"
He says he doesn't know it in English.
She asks him to explain what sort of thing it involved, and as he drives he tells her something about it.
She says it sounds like it was probably some sort of cognitive therapy.
"Yeah, I think so," he says.
"And it helped?" she asks.
"Yeah, it helped."
"Were there meds?"
"Meds?"
"Were you on some sort of medication?"
"Yes."
"Okay," she says. And then, "Do you mind if I ask what?"
"Seroxat."
"Are you still on it?"
"No," he says. "I stopped it a few years ago."
"Okay," she says.
"You?" he asks.
"Meds?"
"Yeah."
"Yes," she says, lighting a cigarette. "Sometimes."

Things are slightly different after that. Something is different between them. She seems to take him more seriously or something.

One sign of this is that she sometimes stays for longer after they have sex in his apartment.

One day, as they lie on the sofa listening to the rain intensifying on the roof-window, she asks him what he did when he first arrived in London. He tells her that he worked on the door of a strip club in Soho.

"A strip club?"
"Yes."
"What do you mean?"
"You know."
"What strip club?"
"You won't know it."
He tells her the name. It makes her laugh. "What was that like?" she asks.
"It was okay," he says.
She makes a face that means—*That's what you say about everything.*
She asks him if he ever slept with any of the women who worked there.
"What sort of question is that?"
"Well, did you?"
"One," he says.
"And?"
"And what?"
"What was it like?"
"What do you mean?"
"Was it good?"
"Yeah," he says with a shrug.
She asks him what happened, exactly.

"Nothing much," he says. They just had sex a few times and hung out together for a while. He explains that usually he didn't interact much with the women who worked there. They didn't take people like him very seriously, he says.

"No?"
"No."
"What do you mean people like you?"
"People that worked there. On the door or whatever."
"How long did you work there?"
"Few months."
She asks him what else he did.
"Work?"

She nods.
"Various stuff," he says.
It's nearly dark.
He stands to switch on a light.
"Do you sleep with other women?" she asks him.
"You mean now?"
She nods.
"Sometimes," he says.
"I hope you like... take precautions."
"Of course."
"Would you describe yourself as promiscuous?" she asks.
"Not really," he says.
"Do you use those apps?"
"What apps?"
"You know—those apps."
"Yeah. Sometimes."
"How do they work?"
He explains.
"And what, you just have sex or what?"
"It depends," he says. "Sometimes."
"Is that what you want?" she asks.
"What?"
"Just sex."
"It depends," he says.
"On what?"
"The situation."
"What about our situation?" she asks.
"What about it?"
"Forget it," she says after a few seconds.
She puts her clothes on.
"See you tomorrow," she says.
"Yeah," he says.
It's quite nice to have sex with her, and then to be alone.

He likes the moments just after she has left, when he pulls open one of the roof-windows and lets in the quiet roar of the traffic on the Embankment. That sound is always there, even in the middle of the night.

She's lonely, he thinks.

Not that she spends much time actually alone. She has a full social life—a lot of lunches and launch parties and things like that—and she and her husband do quite a lot of entertaining as well. This seems to merge into his work interests, and István is often unsure, observing it from outside, whether a particular party is a private thing or a work thing or some mixture of the two. As far as he understands it, her husband inherited a small Swedish electronics company from his father, and in the decades since then has turned it into a very large electronics company.

Sometimes they entertain in the Cheyne Walk garden and from the windows of his apartment István is able to look down over the slates and see part of the lawn, the far end, where the stone steps go up to the shrubbery—for London, the garden is vast. People wander down that far sometimes, singly or in small groups, away from the main noise and activity on the terrace, and when they do he is able to see them.

On one such occasion he's watching two people down there, a man and a woman, talking to each other and laughing about something, and it's only after a few seconds that he sees that it's actually them, Mr. and Mrs. Nyman. He finds it slightly shocking that he didn't notice that immediately. It's partly just that it's twilight, and everything is indistinct. There's something else though, he thinks, still watching them from his window. It's that he has never seen them interacting like this before—talking sort of secretively to each other, and laughing at something together.

Her husband waves to someone who István can't see, and a few moments later they're joined by another man. As far as István is able to make out he's about her husband's age, and holding a drink. The three of them talk for a while—Helen does most of the talking and the men sometimes laugh at what she's saying—and then they walk back toward the house and as they do that she does something else that István has never seen her do before—she touches her husband in an affectionate way. As they walk over the grass she puts her hand on his shoulder. And then they pass out of István's field of vision, and a few minutes later he pulls the roof-window shut.

She says she's going to the National Gallery.
"Are you meeting someone there?" he asks her.
"No," she says.
He's going with her, of course. That's his job, to go to places with her. If she wants to look around the National Gallery, he's

supposed to be there with her.

At first she doesn't say anything.

He follows her around at a slight distance, keeping his eyes open.

Their feet creak on the wooden floors.

The gallery is quite empty. It's midmorning, and a weekday.

"What do you think of that?" she asks him.

"Sorry?"

He steps closer.

"What do you think of that?" she says.

"What do I think of it?"

"Yes."

"Nice arse," he says, after looking at the picture for a few moments. He knows it's not the sort of answer she was looking for, and he's vaguely aware that he was afraid of saying something stupid by accident, so he said something stupid on purpose.

She laughs in a way that's difficult to interpret. "That's all you have to say?" she says.

"It's true, isn't it?"

"Yes," she says. "It's true."

"What am I supposed to say?" he asks.

"What you see."

"That is what I see."

"Okay."

"Sorry," he says.

"It's okay," she says. "There's no point talking about these things without honesty. About anything."

He points out that quite a few of the pictures seem almost pornographic.

"That's true," she says.

She seems to think for a minute, and then she says, "Most of the things here are either devotional objects, or more or less pornographic, or social trophies, or some combination of those things."

"Okay," he says.

"What they all have in common is that they're interesting to look at in some way. Or that's the idea anyway."

"Sure."

They move on to the next room.

Pictures of eighteenth-century people.

Horses, dogs.

Houses and fields.

The people look proudly out at them as they walk past.

"Social trophies?" István suggests.

"Very much so," she says.

They stop in front of one of the pictures.

"Social media, even," she says. "*Look at me, look at my land. Look at how successful I am*."

István leans in to see the picture's title. "Mr. and Mrs. Andrews," he says.

"Yes."

They look at it together for a few more moments, and then move on to another room.

"I like the use of the color blue in that one," István says, trying to enter into the spirit of it.

"The Titian?"

"That one," he says, pointing.

"Yes, it's nice," she says.

They walk past some other pictures.

When she stops, he stops too.

He finds it hard to predict which ones she will stop in front of.

A table with lots of fancy objects on it. Also an ugly brownish skull.

"Why is that skull there?" he asks.

"Why do you think?" she says.

About half an hour later they leave the gallery and stand in the portico, smoking and looking at the people and pigeons in Trafalgar Square.

He only has one cigarette left. They're sharing it. "Thanks for the art lesson," he says, taking it from her.

"That's okay," she says.

He picks her husband up from Farnborough. It's quite late.

"How was the flight?" he asks him.

"What?"

"How was the flight?"

Mr. Nyman just shrugs and makes a noise. He looks tired and obviously doesn't feel like talking.

It takes nearly an hour to drive from Farnborough to Cheyne Walk.

"Good night," István says when they arrive at the house.

"Yes, good night," Mr. Nyman says, and István goes up to his apartment and microwaves a Waitrose Beef Stroganoff.

He sleeps with Thomas's nanny. She's Canadian, about twenty-five, and also lives in the house, in another small apartment at the top of the service stairs.

It just sort of happens.

One evening they arrive home at the same time.

She's drunk.

She asks him if he wants another drink in her apartment.

The next morning she says to him, "That was a mistake."

"Okay," he says.

He walks across the landing to his own apartment and has a shower.

It's a rainy Sunday.

He likes the sound of the rain on the roof-windows, especially in the morning on a day when he doesn't have to go anywhere.

He enjoyed his night with the Canadian nanny. He doesn't feel that it was a mistake himself. He would have been okay with seeing her again, if she had wanted to. That she doesn't want to is okay as well. He has this feeling, with women, that it's hard to have an experience that feels entirely new, that doesn't feel like something that has already happened, and will probably happen again in some very similar way, so that it never feels like all that much is at stake. There's often this feeling of—*Yes, I like you, but I like other people as well. It's not even that I like them more. It's just that I don't like them less*. So to be with any one person feels like an arbitrary thing, and that arbitrary feeling has started to undermine any lingering sense that there might be a particular person that he's somehow meant to be with.

Later in the afternoon the rain stops and he decides that he will go out after all.

He's not sure where he's going.

He's just walking through Chelsea.

He ends up walking quite far.

He has an eggs Benedict at a place near Sloane Square, and then walks up to Harvey Nichols and tries on a blue overcoat that he's had his eye on.

Looking at himself in the full-length mirror, he wonders what Helen will say the first time she sees him in it.

She will say something.

She always says something.

"I can't stop thinking about you," she says.

"I think about you, too," he says.

"It's like I'm addicted to thinking about you," she says.

He smiles at her.

"It's like I don't do anything else these days."

He smiles at her, and lights a cigarette.

"It's absurd. What did I used to do? I don't know. That sort of feeling of addiction, that's what love is, I think," she says.

"Yeah?"

"Isn't it?"

"Maybe."

"I love you," she says. "That's what I'm trying to say. There, I've said it."

He opens his mouth to speak and she says, "No, don't say anything."

He hadn't actually known what he was about to say.

"Don't say anything," she says again.

"Okay," he says.

"I'm going to leave now."

"Will I see you tomorrow?" he asks.

"Why wouldn't you?" she says.

"Okay," he says.

He notices that her hand is shaking as she opens the door.

In fact he doesn't see her the next day. As it often has been this autumn, the weather is too overcast and wet for her husband to use the helicopter and István has to drive him to the house in Hertfordshire. It's near a village called Ayot St. Peter. Her husband then asks him to stay the night there, as he has to go back to London the day after that.

The rain pelts against the windows of the house.

Mr. Nyman watches horse racing on TV, and makes phone calls.

Later István drives into Stevenage to pick up a Chinese takeout for him, and while he's there he sends her a text message saying that her husband has asked him to stay the night.

She sends back a sad face.

The next morning he walks around the lake on the sodden path. He smokes a cigarette in the little Greek temple at the top of the hill.

When he returns to the house and looks at his phone there are two new messages from her.

He puts down the phone without sending anything back, and shaves in the bathroom next to the room where he slept on the third floor.

While he's shaving another message arrives.

He stands at the window in the bathroom, his face still partially covered with shaving foam, wondering what to do.

She hasn't sent him messages like this until now. They definitely imply the existence of a new situation between them and he's aware that if he sends her something similar it will have the effect of signaling his acceptance of that new situation, undefined as it is.

He is still standing at the bathroom window with his phone in his hand, looking out.

The bathrooms here are just like rooms—they have Persian carpets on the floor (though admittedly old, slightly threadbare ones) and the sort of furniture normally found in living rooms. From the window of this one there's a view of the wide lawn sloping down to the lake, and on the other side of the water the hill with the little Greek temple among the trees.

I'm thinking of you too

He sends it.

Then he finishes shaving and puts on his suit and tie and goes downstairs.

Her husband is having breakfast. "Morning," he says when István knocks and enters the dining room.

Mrs. Szymanski the housekeeper is there too, pouring him some more coffee.

István asks what time he was thinking of returning to London.

"In a couple of hours?" Mr. Nyman says. He's wearing a dark blue polo-neck and looking at a newspaper while he eats.

"Okay," István says.

"About eleven," Mr. Nyman says.

It's actually more like twelve when he emerges from the house, followed by Mr. Szymanski with his things.

Her friend the artist has an exhibition at a fashionable gallery. Helen was somehow instrumental in making it happen, and she and her husband attend the private view.

They leave at about eight o'clock.

"Thank you for coming," she says to her husband as István drives them home.

"That's all right," Mr. Nyman says. He has taken hold of the handle over the window and is looking out at the streets of Shoreditch while dingy orange light moves across his ageing but still handsome face.

"What did you think of the work?" she asks him.

"Not much," he says.

"What do you mean?"

"I didn't think much of it."

"I thought it was excellent," she says.

Her husband laughs.

"Why are you laughing?"

"What do you mean it was excellent?" he says.

"I thought it was."

"In what way was it excellent?"

"In lots of ways."

"It was absurd."

"No it wasn't."

"Yes it was. Any normal person would agree with me."

"That's such a stupid thing to say," she says. "What do you mean *any normal person*?"

"I don't know," Mr. Nyman says. Then something occurs to him. "Like István, for instance. What did you think of it, István?"

"That is so patronizing," she says.

"No it isn't."

"Yes it is."

"Why? What's wrong with being normal?"

"You don't have to answer that, István," she says.

"You don't want him to answer because you know he'll agree with me," Mr. Nyman says.

“What did you really think of it?” she asks him the next day.

István shrugs. “Strange,” he says.

“It didn’t say anything to you?”

“Say anything to me?”

“Yes.”

“I’m not sure what you mean,” he says.

“I just want to know how it affected you,” she says. “I know it’s quite dark. That’s another reason Karl didn’t like it. He doesn’t like dark stuff.”

“Okay.”

“He just doesn’t want to go there. He’s afraid of it. Especially since he had cancer.”

“Yeah?” István says.

“Yes,” she says. “A few years ago.”

“What sort?”

“Colon,” she says. “He had an operation to remove it. He’s okay now.”

The following Friday, she asks him if he wants to have a swim in the pool. There’s a swimming pool in the basement of the Cheyne Walk house. It’s the first time that István has seen it.

As they hold on to the side with slicked-back hair and smooch he gets a hard-on and they pull off their swimsuits and have sex.

Afterward they lie naked on the warm tiles at the side.

“I need to get a wax,” she says.

He shrugs.

“You don’t mind it like this?” she says, looking down at herself.

“No,” he says. Her pubic hair, what little there is of it, doesn’t really seem to have any particular color. It’s a sort of totally neutral tone. “What are you doing for Christmas?” he asks. “You’ll be at Ayot, I suppose?”

“No, we go to Sweden,” she says. “That’s what we do every year.”

“Okay,” he says.

“You don’t mind?”

At the same time as she says that, they hear a sound.

“Tommy?” she calls. “Is that you?”

She covers herself with a towel.

István stands up and pulls on his wet trunks.

“Tommy?” she calls again. “There was definitely someone there,” she says.

“Yeah.”

“Who else could it be?” she says.

“I don’t know,” István says.

“Wasn’t he supposed to be at the cinema with his friend?” she says.

“Yeah, I thought…”

“Do you think he saw anything?” she whispers.

István shrugs. “I don’t know,” he says.

“Shit,” she says.

“It’s okay,” he says.

“No, it’s not okay,” she says.

She tugs on one of the toweling robes and leaves.

“I think it was him,” she says, when she comes back a few minutes later. “I think he saw something.”

“Why? Why do you think that?”

“He was being weird.”

“He’s here?”

“*Yes*.”

“Why isn’t he at the film?” István asks.

“He said it was boring. They left early. Khaled’s driver brought him home.”

“Okay.”

“He was being *weird*,” she says again.

“What do you mean?”

“He wouldn’t look at me.”

For a few moments, standing next to the pool, they stare at each other.

“What if he says something to Karl?” she asks.

“He won’t.”

“But what if he does?”

“He won’t,” István says again.

“How do you know?”

"Try to imagine that conversation," István says.
"What conversation?"
"If he told him. Try to imagine it."
"Why?"
"I can't imagine it," István says. "I can't imagine him saying anything. Even if he saw something."

After that she encourages Thomas to spend the weekends at Ayot St. Peter with his father. When he says it's boring there she says he should invite friends to stay. "I'm sure they'd find it exciting to go in the helicopter," she says. "Wouldn't they?"
"Not really," he says.
"Why not?"
"They've been in helicopters before," he says.
"All of them?"
"Yes."
"I can't believe *all* of them have been," she says.
"Why don't *you* come if it's so exciting?" Thomas says.
"I have things to do in London," she says.
"What things?"
"Tommy, please don't argue with me about this," she says.

A few days before Christmas, her husband and Thomas leave for Sweden. She makes up some reason why she has to stay in London for an extra day or two, and the night before she leaves to join them she sleeps in István's bed. It's the first time that she's done that, the first time that they have actually slept together. It feels slightly strange.
In the morning, after they have had sex again, she says, "I'm going to miss you."
"I'm going to miss you," he says.
"What are you going to do?" she asks.
"Don't know," he says.
"You're going to be a good boy though, right?" she says.
"Meaning?"
"What do you think?"
"I don't know," he says.
"Yes you do."
"Is that how it is?" he asks.
"I think so," she says. "Isn't it?"
"I mean," he says, "you're still married, yeah? You're going to be with your husband, aren't you?"
Something about her expression when he says that, an almost frightened look, as if she fears she might have misunderstood something, makes him feel sorry for her.
"You don't need to worry," he says.
"Whatever," she says. "I got you this."
It's a small green leather box.
He opens it.
"I know you like classic watches," she says.
"I do," he says. "Thank you."
"It's the Audemars Piguet."
"I know," he says. "Thank you."
He drives her to the airport for her flight to Stockholm.
She's flying private, from Luton.
It's a very cold day. There's even a small amount of overnight snow on some of the hills next to the highway as he drives back into London.

He goes running in Battersea Park. There's filmy ice on the boating lake, and they scatter rough pink salt on the steps of Peace Pagoda.
Weeks pass and the park still seems dead.
Then the days lengthen. The light persists until past four in the afternoon in a way that feels strange and surprising at first.
It's still winter though.
The first daffodils arrive in a hostile world.
And then, what seems like only a few weeks later, the chestnuts have flowers and snow blossoms onto the path.
In the park, they cut the grass.
They cut the grass in the garden at Cheyne Walk as well.

The roof-windows are open and toweling his hair after a shower he hears the drone of the mower, not knowing what it is at first.

When her husband is away she sometimes spends the night in his apartment at the top of the house. He never spends the night in her part of the house.

The nights are warm now.

With the windows open the sound of the traffic on the Embankment is always there, a faint murmur from quite far away.

Sometimes there are other, more immediate, sounds. When the Nymans have parties outside in the garden he is able to hear quite clearly the tinkle of drinks and the hubbub of talk, abrupt outbreaks of laughter or for a moment an individual voice that he knows, hers or her husband's. On evenings like that he sometimes stands at the open roof-window looking at the part of the lawn that he can see and the occasional party guests who stray down that far, ghostly against the dusk in their pale clothes.

There are those London summer days when summer seems muffled somehow, when a cool, humid grayness hangs in the park as he runs.

Statues hold their positions.

Green water goes through the sluice at the end of the lake, where there's a sudden composty smell.

Here and there a leaf falls.

The rain knocks leaves off the trees and they plaster the sidewalks and the lustrous charcoal skin of the Mercedes.

He takes it for a full valet service at the place in Clapham. While it's being done he sits in a Caffé Nero, looking at things on his phone.

There are more days of rain and then the first sharp night.

The thermostat starts the heating after months of inactivity, making half-forgotten watery noises in the pipes.

"What is this?" he asks her as they lie there in the dark.

"What?" she says.

"This," he says. "Us."

"I don't know," she says, after a long silence.

"It's okay for you," he says. "When you feel like sex you come up here. Then you go back downstairs and get on with your life."

"That's not fair," she says.

"Isn't it?"

"No."

"How is it not fair?" he asks.

"That's not how I think of it."

"That's not how you *think* of it?"

"No."

"Well, that's how it is."

She doesn't say anything for a long time.

Then she says, "Have you got a cigarette?"

He leans over in the dark and feels for the packet on the nightstand. Then the lighter. He lights it himself and hands it to her. She first moves into a sitting position and then takes it from him.

"Thanks," she says.

He passes her an ashtray.

"Thanks," she says.

"Maybe I should get a new job," he says.

"No," she says, as he knew she would. "I don't want you to do that."

In the morning she leaves and he stands at the open roof-window smoking a cigarette and wondering what to do.

And then her husband's cancer comes back.

The strange thing is that on the surface nothing changes. Mr. Nyman looks tired. Otherwise he looks like he always does.

István drives him to Harley Street for some scans. It's drizzling. The wipers are going. He drops him off and then, after finding somewhere to park, he stands in Pret, looking at the sandwiches. In the past he would have taken something like an All Day Breakfast, something with bacon in it. Now he finds himself more drawn to the vegetarian options. He has a smoothie too, one of the healthy-looking green ones.

When he picks him up afterward Mr. Nyman doesn't say anything. He just takes his seat in the back of the Mercedes and sits there on the quilted leather, staring out the window.

"Cheyne Walk?" István asks.

"Yes," Mr. Nyman says, his thoughts obviously elsewhere.

He says he wants to go to Ayot St. Peter and wait there for the results of the scans, which will take a few days. Helen asks if he wants her to go with him. He says he does, which surprises her. Since she doesn't like using the helicopter, István drives them there.

It's a tense weekend.

István hears shouting downstairs and a door slam.

Later Helen comes up to his room.

"What happened?" he asks.
"He's losing it," she says.
"How do you mean?"
"He's impossible. Whatever I do is wrong. Whatever I say."
"Well," István says.
"He's gone for a walk," she says.
"It's raining."
"That's what I told him." She sits down on István's bed. "I should have stayed in London," she says.
He shrugs.
"I just annoy him," she says. "I think it was one of those situations where I wanted to do the right thing by offering to come here, and he wanted to do the right thing by saying yes, but actually I didn't want to come here and he doesn't want me to be here."
István grunts.
He shakes a cigarette loose from the packet.
The rain is ticking at the window. Outside, the hill on the other side of the lake is only half-visible.
"Do you want me to give you a blow job?" she asks.
He defers, for a moment, putting the cigarette in his mouth. "Seriously?"
"Yes," she says.
"Okay," he says.

On Monday morning there's an unexpected phone call. Afterward the house is ominously quiet. Helen tells István that it was the doctor with bad news—the tumor is more advanced than they thought it was. It has already spread into the peritoneum, she says, and possibly further.
"What is the peritoneum?" István asks.
"Sort of the intestinal wall," she says. "I'm not sure exactly. They want to operate as soon as possible though."
"So we're going back to London today?"
"Yes," she says.
When her husband had the previous tumor removed, a few years earlier, the operation was done at a private hospital in Germany.
He says he wants to have this operation there as well.
"Are you sure?" she asks him as they drive back to London.
"Yes," he says.
She says it might be simpler and quicker if he had it done in London.
"I want to have it done at Bad Trissl," he says. "Why do you always have to argue with me about everything?"
"I'm not *arguing*."
"Yes you are."
"No I'm not."
"Yes you *are*. I want to have it done at Bad Trissl."
"Okay," she says. "If that's what you want. Fine."

"I understand why," she says to István later. "Last time they operated, and everything was okay afterward. He wants that to happen again, in exactly the same way."
"Sure."
"He wants the same room in the hospital, the same doctor, everything."
"Is that possible?"
"I don't know."
The arrangements are made and only a day or two later István drives him to Farnborough for his flight to Munich.
Helen stays in London for a few more days, until Thomas's half-term starts. Then she and István pick him up from his boarding school.
"Daddy's cancer has come back," she says to him.
"Okay," he says after a few moments.
"Yes," she says, looking sad.
"Will he be okay?"
"The doctors think so," she says.
"When did it come back?" Thomas asks.
"He got the results about a week ago," she says.
"Why didn't you tell me?"
"I didn't want to tell you on the phone," she says.
"Why didn't he tell me himself?"
"I don't know," she says. "Maybe he was embarrassed."
"Embarrassed?"

"Yes."

"Embarrassed?" Thomas says again.

"Yes. People are embarrassed to be sick sometimes, darling," she says.

The next day they fly to Germany to be with him when he has the operation. István drives them to London City Airport. Thomas wears headphones and stares out the window and doesn't say anything. Helen speaks to her husband's sister Mathilde on the phone.

"Aunt Mathilde says hi," she says to Thomas when she has finished.

"Okay," he says.

"She says she's thinking of us."

"Okay," Thomas says.

István takes the suitcases—there are four, which seems a lot since they are only going to be away for a few days—to the Lufthansa Business Class check-in desk. Helen hands over her and Thomas's passports to the man there.

"Okay," she says, when the luggage is checked in.

"Okay," István echoes.

She puts the passports into her handbag. "We'll be back on Sunday," she says, speaking to him as if he were just the driver. "I'll let you know what time."

"I hope it goes okay," he says.

"I'm sure it will," she says.

That evening she phones him from the Kempinski Vier Jahreszeiten hotel in Munich.

"I know this is weird," she says.

"Yeah," he says.

"This whole situation."

"Yeah."

"Are *you* okay?" she asks.

"Me?"

She waits for him to say something.

"Sure," he says. "You?"

"Yes, I'm okay," she says.

She returns to England on the Sunday to take Thomas back to school and then two days later she flies back to Germany herself.

A few weeks pass, which she mostly spends in Germany.

Sometimes she appears in London for a few days and then disappears again.

When she's in London she and István don't see much of each other.

He doesn't ask her questions about what's happening.

For a while they almost sort of lose touch.

One morning she phones him from Munich and asks him to pick her up from London City that afternoon.

As he drives her to Cheyne Walk he asks her how things are and she tells him that the doctors in Germany want to do another operation, that the first one wasn't entirely successful.

"Okay," he says.

"They didn't get all of it or something," she says. "Or it seems there's still something there anyway. They say they have to totally remove most of his lower intestine."

"I'm sorry to hear that," István says.

"Yes," she says.

He's slightly surprised how upset she is.

It has always seemed to him that she had no significant feelings for her husband, that if she ever loved him she didn't anymore.

She has said as much herself, more than once.

The thing is, it's not as simple as that, he thinks.

Whatever word she wanted to use for it, or not use, there obviously was a significant emotional attachment there.

It was naive of him to think that it might be otherwise.

He seems to be the last person she wants to talk to about it though.

She has lunch with her friend the artist.

"Are you okay?" he asks her when he picks her up afterward at the River Café.

"Yes," she says.

"Sure?"

"Yes," she says again, wiping her eyes.

"If you want to talk to me," he says.

"I don't," she says.

"Okay," he says.

They drive back to Cheyne Walk in silence.

The next day she flies to Germany again, and there's something so stiff and distant about the way they part at the airport that driving back into London he wonders if this is it, if the whole of the last year has just been a waste of time.

That evening, though, she phones him. "I'm sorry," she says.

"For what?"

"For being such a cunt."

After a few seconds he says, "Don't worry about it."

"This is really difficult for me," she says. "This whole situation."

"I know," he says. "Obviously."

"I feel very guilty," she says.

"About what?"

"About everything."

"You shouldn't," he says.

"Why not?"

"It's not your fault."

"Isn't it?"

"No."

They talk for another twenty minutes.

Even so, he's still far from sure where things stand, to the extent that he wonders whether some of the things she said on the phone might have been her way of ending it, or of starting to end it.

And then the next day she sends him some naked pictures of herself taken in the hotel room in Munich. He studies them. It's been a few months since he's seen her naked, which makes them more interesting. They're tasteful soft porn. An open bathrobe, things like that.

He Facebook messages her. *Thanks for the pictures*

She messages back almost immediately. *That's ok*

I like them

:)

What have you been up to?

Went to see Karl

How is he?

Ok

How's the hotel?

Ok

It looks nice

Why don't you join me here?

There's a delay this time, before he messages back.

During the delay something else arrives from her—*I'd like that*

He has already typed *Yeah?* in response to the last thing, he just hasn't sent it yet.

He hesitates, and then sends it anyway, even though it means something slightly different now.

Lufthansa Business Class from London City to Munich just involves having an empty seat next to you and being served a meal you don't really want. Still, it makes him feel sort of important to be in that part of the plane. And the feeling of importance is prolonged by the sight, at Arrivals, of a man in a suit holding up a sheet of paper with his name printed on it.

"You're here for the conference?" the man asks, when they're on the highway.

"Sorry?"

"The security conference."

"Yeah," István says, not sure what the man is talking about.

The man tells him that the drive might take longer than usual because of road closures to do with the conference.

"Okay," István says.

They don't speak again until they arrive at the hotel.

When they do, István isn't sure if he needs to pay the man or not. It seems not. The man simply wishes him a pleasant stay in Munich and István thanks him and follows a porter, who already has his suitcase, into the lobby.

Another porter accompanies him up to the room.

When the porter has left, István snoops around a bit. That's how it feels, like he's snooping. Like this isn't his own room that he's in. It's partly the silence, which seems unnaturally pure, and the way that everything is so perfectly arranged and undisturbed. He looks into the bathroom, and opens the minibar. He holds aside the net curtain and checks the view from the window—a neat courtyard overlooked by many other windows like his own. In one cupboard there's a Nespresso machine. In another some wooden hangers, one of which has a bathrobe on it.

He turns to the room again.

Imposing lamps flank the bed, and one whole wall, strikingly, looks like a detail from an eighteenth-century painting or tapestry, massively blown up—an enigmatically smiling woman in a tall white wig.

He takes off his shoes and tries the mattress, and while he's lying there he phones her.

"You're here?" she says.

"I'm here. I tried you from the airport."

"I was asleep," she says. "Sorry. Everything okay?"

"Very nice. Thank you."

"What are you doing?"

"Not much. I just arrived."

She asks him if he wants to come to her room.

"Okay," he says.

She tells him the room number and he puts the phone down.

He lies there for another minute or two against the pillows, looking at the ceiling, which is discreetly studded with smoke detectors and other things, and wondering what will happen now. He's not sure what to expect, after the last few months.

It also feels strange to meet her in a place like this. It feels very much like her world, a world from which he has always been excluded until now.

He takes the elevator up. She's on the top floor.

After opening the door of her room, she just looks at him for a few seconds.

"What?" he says.

"Nothing. I'm just looking at you."

When she asks him how he is, he shrugs. "Okay. You?"

"As you see."

He's not sure what she means. Maybe that she looks tired, is wearing tracksuit trousers and a T-shirt and socks that are falling off and no makeup.

"I know I look shit," she says.

"You don't look shit," he says.

She seems to have some sort of enormous suite. There's an eight-seater dining table. A marble fireplace. Various arrangements of sofas and other furniture.

"Is that your terrace?" he asks.

"M-hm."

He slides open the glass door and steps out.

It's a mild, gray day.

She follows him onto the terrace. There's some furniture out there, a plastic-wicker sofa and some matching chairs around a low table.

"Nice," he says.

"It's okay."

"So," he says. "What now?"

"I don't know. What do you want to do?" she asks.

"Do?" He's lighting a cigarette.

"Yes."

"What am I here to do?" he asks.

She shrugs. "I don't know. Support me?"

"Support you?"

"Yes."

"What does that mean?"

"I'm not sure."

"Okay."

The terrace is quite high up. There's a faint sound of traffic from somewhere out of sight.

"Do you want to go out somewhere?" she asks.

"I don't know. What is there?"

"In Munich?"

He nods.

"You mean to do?" she says.

"Yes."

"Like sightseeing?"

"For instance."

"Not much," she says. "It's not that kind of place."

He looks around, seeing if any windows have obvious sightlines onto the terrace. None seem to. It's mostly lower roofs around them.

"You could sunbathe naked here," he says.

She laughs. "In this weather?"

"In summer."

"Is your room okay?" she asks.

"It's very nice."

"I had to beg them to give it to me," she says.

"Yeah?"

"There's this conference on."

"The security conference?"

"Yes," she says, perhaps surprised that he knows about it. "The hotel's full of NATO people or whatever."

He tells her that the man who drove him from the airport asked him if he was there for it.

"What did you say?"

"I said I was."

She laughs at that. "Why?"

"I don't know," he says.

He sits on the plastic-wicker sofa.

She's standing in front of him.

He looks up at her, having to squint despite the fact that it's overcast. He even shields his eyes with his hand for a moment. It's not warm out there and her nipples have appeared through the fabric of the T-shirt.

"So there's not a lot to do?" he says.

"No," she says.

"So what have you been doing?"

"Not much."

There's a silence and then she says, "Want to see the bathroom? It's quite amazing."

"Sure," he says.

They have sex in the bathroom, just sort of anyhow, still half-dressed on the warm marble. It's over in about two minutes and then they lie in the enormous oval tub with their heads at opposite ends. The tub is in the middle of the floor, its exterior finished in the same smoke-veined white marble as everything else there. They spend nearly an hour in it, their legs intertwined under the greenish water, or lying heavily on each other's slippery torsos.

Her small pink foot is next to his face.

If he shuts one eye it seems to be next to *her* head, at the far end of the tub.

He half-sits to let in more hot.

"Are you hungry?" she asks.

"Starting to be."

"Should we order something?"

"Okay."

"I don't want to go out," she says.

"No," he agrees.

They order some food up to the suite and watch the stupidly huge TV. After hopping around for a while, they end up with what seems to be the German version of *Strictly*. It's easy to follow, and amazing how quickly allegiances form. Within twenty minutes it feels as if they've always been emotionally involved in the lives of these people, as if they've always wanted some of them to succeed and some of them to fail.

They laugh at them too, of course. Just the fact that they're speaking German seems funny when everything else is so familiar from the English version. There seems to be a contradiction, she says, between the German language as they experience it and light entertainment formats. Certainly the fact that everyone is speaking German makes the sequined costumes seem even more camp.

The doorbell of the suite sounds.

István, in one of the hotel dressing gowns—it's made of a heavy quilted material the color of bronze—opens the door and the man pushes the cart into the room.

When he starts to unload it onto the table, István says, "No, it's okay, just leave it."

He signs for it and hands the man the ten-euro note that Helen took from her purse for the tip.

The man thanks him.

"No worries," István says.

The man withdraws, and István wheels the cart over to the sofa facing the TV and lifts the metal covers from the plates.

"Thanks," she says.

It's dark outside by then.

After eating he smokes a cigarette on the terrace.

When he steps back inside she asks him if he wants to stay the night.

"Is that okay?" he asks.

"Yes, it's okay," she says.

It's the first time that he's ever slept in her bed.

The next morning they have breakfast at Café Luitpold, which is about a ten-minute walk away, on the other side of the Hofgarten.

She says she discovered it during the weeks she was there on her own.

While they wait for their food, he asks how her husband is. It's the first time that either of them has mentioned him.

"He's okay," she says.

And then she says, “No, actually he’s not okay.”

“No?”

“No.”

“The operation?” István asks.

“It was last week.”

“And?”

“And what?”

“Was it successful?”

“I don’t know,” she says. “It’s too early to say. It’s not just that though.”

“What is it?” he asks.

For a while she doesn’t say anything.

She has a sip of her coffee.

“He’s just very depressed,” she says. “That’s what’s hardest to deal with in a way, the way the physical difficulties lead to emotional difficulties, and there just seems to be no way out of it.”

“Yeah,” István says.

“The whole situation is just awful.”

He nods.

She visits her husband most days. The hospital isn’t actually in Munich. It’s in another town, about eighty kilometers away.

István drives her there, in an Audi that they hire. First they take the highway east out of Munich, and then switch to another one, going south with the mountains straight ahead of them now. Sometimes the mountains dissolve in shafts of sunlight. Sometimes they stand dark and solid against the sky. They drive toward them and ten minutes later they’re nearly there. Soon after the exit there are signs for Onkologisches Kompetenzzentrum Bad Trissl.

István parks, and they walk across the asphalt to the entrance.

While she’s upstairs he sits on one of the leather sofas in the lobby looking at things on his phone.

She usually spends about an hour up there.

They usually drive back to Munich in silence and usually arrive at around dusk.

At first he leaves his things in his own room in the hotel. Slowly, though, they start to migrate and within a week most of his clothes are in her cupboards and his washbag and shaving kit, his toothbrush and his skincare products, are on the smoke-veined white marble next to one of the sinks in her bathroom.

The doctor tells her that they plan to start the chemotherapy as soon as her husband has recovered from the surgery, which has left him extremely weak. He says there’s no way that the surgery alone will stop the cancer.

“Okay,” she says. As a response to what the doctor has just said, it feels insufficient. She doesn’t know what else to say though.

The doctor says, “I’m not sure how to put this.”

She looks at him, waiting.

“I’m a bit worried about your husband’s attitude.”

“What do you mean?” she asks.

“The will to fight is very important,” the doctor says.

“Yes,” she says.

“You understand?”

“Yes.”

“Maybe if you could talk to him,” the doctor says.

“Okay,” she says.

“You understand?”

“Yes.”

“Thank you,” the doctor says.

She tells István what the doctor said to her. They’re driving back to Munich. The snow that fell a few days ago still looks faintly luminous up on the mountains even though it’s already dark on the highway.

“Are you going to talk to him?” he asks her.

“And say what?”

“I don’t know.”

“He seemed really pessimistic,” she says.

“The doctor?”

“Yes.”

“What did he say exactly?”

“It wasn’t what he said so much. It was his whole demeanor or whatever. I think he thinks Karl’s going to die.”

“He’d tell you if he thought that.”

“No, he wouldn’t,” she says.

He wonders whether to ask her about the money, what happens to it if her husband dies.

He doesn’t.

She's in tears.

"You okay?"

She shakes her head. He feels her do it. It's too dark to see.

He holds her for a while, feeling the wetness of her tears on his shoulder.

"What is it?" he says.

"He's going to die," she says.

"No."

"Yes."

"We don't know."

"I know."

"Shh."

His head hurts. He has no idea what time it is. His eyes are open, though the darkness is so solid around them that it makes no difference.

"It's my fault," she says.

"No it isn't."

"Yes it is."

"Why do you say that?"

While he waits for her to answer he nearly falls asleep again.

He's not sure if she has answered or not.

She might have answered. He might have been asleep when she did. He might have fallen asleep and woken up again without even noticing.

She seems to be asleep now.

He slides his arm out from under her neck.

He feels very awake himself suddenly.

He slips out of the bed and feels his way to the door and through the sitting room, where there's enough light to make things out, to the terrace.

He stands on the terrace smoking a cigarette and listening to the faint sound of the traffic from somewhere far below.

Thinking about death makes everything seem sad because it makes everything seem unimportant, at least for a moment.

Once, when she was telling him how she often didn't know what to say to her husband when she went to visit him, she asked him what he would want her to say to him if he was in her husband's position.

"I don't know," he said, honestly enough.

He found it hard to imagine himself in her husband's position.

To actually imagine it.

What it would actually be like.

Would he want people to ignore the illness, and talk about other things?

Or would he want them to talk about the illness?

Or would it not make any difference what they said?

The way he imagines it, more than anything else he would perhaps feel very lonely—he would feel that he was facing this thing on his own, and that whatever anyone else said, or didn't say, the fact would remain that they weren't facing it, and he was.

The next morning they wake up later than usual and lie in bed talking. They talk about the situation with her husband. She seems more phlegmatic about it now.

"I'm sorry about last night," she says.

"Why?"

"For being so..."

He waits.

"You know. Hysterical or whatever."

"It's okay," he says. "Obviously."

He wonders whether to ask her what she meant when she said it was her fault. Partly just *what* was her fault?

He doesn't.

Still naked he walks to the window and peels back the heavy curtain.

"What's it like?" she asks.

"Sort of grayish."

She yawns.

He pushes on the Nespresso machine in the cupboard.

The lights flash.

"What should we do today?" he asks.

"I feel very guilty," she says.

"What about?" he asks, after a silence, still looking at the flashing lights on the Nespresso machine.
"What do you think?"
"Us doing this?"
"Yes."
"You didn't seem to feel guilty about it before."
"No," she agrees.
"So?"
"I feel I owe him something more now," she says.
"Okay."
"Or I don't know," she says. "I feel I owe you something as well. It's very difficult."
"What do you owe me?" he asks.
"I don't know," she says.

"You once said to me that you didn't love him," he says to her. "I don't think that's true. I think you do."
"Yes," she says. "In a way. You understand."
"Of course."
"You spend so many years with someone."
"Yes."
"They become part of your life."
"Yes."
"Part of who you are."
"Yes."
"I don't know if it's love," she says.
"Does it matter?" he asks.
"Does what matter?"
"Does it matter what word you use?"
"No. I don't know. Maybe."
She's in the bath.
He's standing a few meters away, shaving at one of the sinks.
There's the scraping of the razor, and sometimes the sound of her moving in the water.
She says that her husband's family—his sister Mathilde for instance—all thought that she "only" married him for his money. What they didn't seem to understand, she says, is how hard it is to say how much the money is or ever was a factor in the situation. While it seems undeniable to her that she may not have found her husband *as* attractive if he had been anything other than very wealthy, she nevertheless *did* find him attractive, and she did think that she was in love with him. It was not, in other words, that she found him unattractive and was only interested in the money. It was never as simple as that. It was that the money, insomuch as it was a factor, will have operated by making her find him actually more attractive as a person than she otherwise would have done, though to what exact degree of difference is obviously impossible to say, so that to even ask the question seems pointless, especially since those sorts of uncertainties, to do with what exactly it is that draws us to another person, in the end surely characterize every decision of that kind, every decision about who we spend our lives with.

There's a spa in the hotel that they sometimes use.
There's a nice pool.
Next to the pool there are indoor lounge chairs with views of the gray Munich skyline. It's a strange feeling to lie there in swimming things with the cold March day just on the other side of the glass.
There are saunas.
"I can't get used to these naked saunas here," she says. "I mean, call me a prude but I find it a bit weird to sit there naked with total strangers."
"You're embarrassed?"
"What?"
"You're embarrassed that they see you naked?"
"It's not just that. I don't want to have to look at *them*. I don't want to have to look at their shriveled little dicks. I don't want to have to look at their saggy tits."
"Then shut your eyes."
"Shut my eyes? That would make it even worse—to be sitting there naked surrounded by naked strangers with my eyes shut? No thank you. I'm surprised how many of the men wax," she says.
"Yeah?"
"Yeah."
"Do you like it?"
"Would you ever do it?"

"I used to sometimes," he says.
"Yeah?"
"When I worked out."
"Yeah?"
"It was sort of part of the culture," he says.
"Why?"
"Why?" He shrugs. "I don't know."
"To make your dicks look bigger?" She's smiling at him.
"Does it do that?"
"Yeah, a bit."
"You've noticed that, have you?"
"Yes, I've noticed that," she says.
Which leads to a conversation about the extent to which, in the sauna, they look.

He admits that he does as well. What he doesn't tell her is that if he finds the sauna mildly arousing, it's only minimally to do with the fact that there are other naked women there. Partly it's that he finds it arousing to be naked himself in front of strangers. What most excites him, though, is to see *her* naked in front of other people. He's not sure what that's about, why that turns him on quite so much. He thinks maybe it's something to do with the fact that she seems, naked in the sauna, in front of other people, to be somehow more naked than it's possible for her to be now when it's just the two of them, so that he often finds himself thinking about it later, sort of drawing on the memory of it for an extra lift of arousal when they're actually having sex.

She speaks to her son, Thomas, on the phone.
"No, he's still in the hospital," she says.
István is lying on one of the sofas, looking at a Champions League match on the muted TV.
"No, it's not good," she says. Her voice, when she speaks to Thomas, is noticeably different from how it is at other times—softer, and at the same time more sure of itself. "I don't know," she says. "They're going to start the chemo soon. The doctor says we just have to wait and see."

When she has finished speaking to him she says, in her normal voice, that she needs a drink, and they go downstairs to the Jahreszeiten bar and have gin and tonics.
"He's coming for a visit this weekend," she says.
"Okay," István says.

Thomas arrives on Friday evening. He's taller than his mother now. He has a room next to hers in the hotel and while he's there István sleeps in his own room a few floors down.

It's a strange feeling, though not particularly an unpleasant one, to sleep alone for two nights in that much smaller room.

More unpleasant is the way that in front of her son Helen talks to him as if he's just the driver. It's not surprising that she should do that. What else would she do? What is surprising is how it makes him feel now. In London, where it went on all the time, he was used to it and it didn't affect him. Now it does. She picks up on that. Late on Friday night she phones him in his room. She and Thomas had dinner together somewhere. "I know this is weird," she says.
"Yeah," he agrees.
"This whole situation."
"Yeah."
"Are you okay?" she asks.
"Me?"
She waits for him to say something.
"Sure," he says. "You?"
"Yes, I'm okay," she says. "I've just had a bath."
"Okay," he says.
"And now I'm lying on my bed, thinking of you."
"Yeah?"
"Yeah," she says.
"Okay."
"I'm naked," she says.
"Okay."
"And I'm imagining that you're here with me."
"Yeah?"
"Mm."
"Okay."
"Mm," she says again.
He wonders if she's actually doing what it sounds like she is.

He's not sure what to do himself. This is the first time anything like this has happened.

"What are *you* doing?" she asks.

"Me?"

"Mm."

"Uh."

"Are you hard?"

"Yeah actually."

"I wish I had it in my mouth."

"That would be nice."

"Mm."

Although there's just silence when she's not speaking, something about the intensity of it is suggestive.

"What are *you* doing?" he asks, after a while.

"What am I doing?"

"Yeah."

"I'm trying to come," she says.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

Aroused by the thought of her doing that, he starts to do the same.

Minutes pass without anything being said, though the phone, on loudspeaker, is next to where he's sitting.

Maybe he makes an audible gasp.

"Did you come?" she asks.

"Yeah," he says, panting slightly. "You?"

"Not yet," she says.

He sits there for another minute or two, wondering whether he should say anything to help her. Then, in a strangled voice, she says, "I'm coming." There's a note of panic to it, as if she's about to be swept away by a flood or something. Then a small shout, and then silence again, although the silence has a different quality now.

The next morning he drives them to the hospital.

She sits in the back with Thomas and they sometimes talk during the hour-long journey. There are also long stretches when they don't.

Thomas looks out the window at the distant mountains with an expression on his face that seems simultaneously worried and bored.

"I don't want you to worry," she says.

"I'm not worried," he says.

"These are the best doctors in the world," she tells him.

"I know," he says, as if it had never occurred to him that they might not be.

"So tell me more about school," she asks him, some time later.

"It's okay," he says.

It seems that he's involved in some sort of school play and they talk about that for a while.

"So what's your part?" she asks him.

"Horatio," he says.

"That's great," she says.

"Not really."

"Why not?"

"It's not an important part," he says.

"Sure it is," she says.

At the hospital they're upstairs for less than half an hour.

István, looking at things on his phone in the lobby, is surprised to see them emerge from the elevator again so soon.

They drive back to Munich in silence, with Thomas wearing his Bose headphones now.

"What are you listening to?" his mother asks him.

He lifts one side of the headphones.

"What are you listening to?" she asks again.

"You wouldn't know it," he says.

She takes him shopping in the afternoon and the two of them have dinner together in the hotel restaurant, which she tells him has a Michelin star.

The next morning István drives them to the airport. Thomas's flight is at about noon. On the way he asks his mother how much longer she'll be staying in Munich.

"I don't know, darling," she says. "We'll have to wait and see."

István stands at a discreet distance while she hugs her son at security. She squeezes him for what feels like a very long time. She has tears in her eyes. Thomas has tears in his eyes as well.

"It will be okay," she says to him.

He just nods.

They wait until he's out of sight—it's only a minute, he's in the priority queue—and then walk back to the Audi.

For a long time neither of them speaks.

"He asked me why you were here," Helen finally says, as they drive back into Munich, with her sitting next to him in the front now.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

"And what did you say?"

"I said I needed you," she says.

"And what did he say?"

"He said for what?"

"And what did you say?"

"I said to drive me to the hospital. And he said is that all? And I said yes."

"He said *is that all*?"

"Yes."

There's a minute of silence. Then he says, "You didn't spend long upstairs at the hospital yesterday."

"No," she says.

"Was it okay?"

"No."

"No?"

"No," she says again.

"Why not? What happened?"

"It was awful actually," she says.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

She doesn't talk much for the rest of the drive into Munich.

Later though, while they're having lunch, she says, obviously still preoccupied with what happened, "Tommy isn't the son that Karl wanted. I'm not saying he doesn't love him. In some way I'm sure he does. He finds it hard to be proud of him though. And Tommy feels that, of course."

"Sure."

"They're just so different," she says. "Karl doesn't understand him."

"No."

"He doesn't understand Tommy's sensitivity. He's disappointed in him. Karl is, I mean."

"Okay."

After a while she makes an effort to talk about other things. Her son seems to be all that she's able to think about though, and the whole afternoon she keeps coming back to him until István wishes that she would stop.

She says she's worried that he isn't happy at his new school, that he's much more affected by his father's illness than he lets on, that he's shutting himself off from her. "We used to be so close," she says.

Finally she seems exhausted by the subject herself and says she wants to drink gin and tonics in the Jahreszeiten bar.

In the morning he has a hangover, and memories of the sort of drunk sex that starts unusually vigorously but then just sort of stops.

"How do you feel?" she asks. She's more used to this sort of thing than he is. Even so, she looks pale and fragile.

They had four or five gin and tonics and no supper.

"Okay," he says.

He has a very long shower and then, wearing sunglasses even though it's not sunny, they walk across the Hofgarten to the Luitpold.

They have cappuccinos.

After a while he feels slightly more normal.

"You okay?" he asks, taking the last of the cappuccino foam with a small spoon.

She understands what he means.

"Yes," she says.

It's raining now and they don't have an umbrella so they just stay there.

He looks at the cakes under the curved glass and points to one, a pear tart. The man with the tongs puts it on a plate.

István eats about half of it and then pushes the plate toward her.

"How is it?" she asks.

"It's delicious," he says.

Outside the rain is falling even more heavily. The florist next door has covered her sidewalk display with a plastic sheet.

"What should we do?" she asks.

"The BMW Museum?"

She laughs.

It's become a joke between them—that he wants to go to the BMW Museum and she doesn't, and also that whenever it's raining and they have nothing else to do he suggests it.

Since then, joking apart, he's been planning to go on his own one day. Now he says that maybe he'll do that this morning.

"And what am I supposed to do?" she says.

"Whatever," he says. "I don't know."

"Thanks."

"Come with me?"

"Seriously? No thank you."

"Why not?"

She makes a face.

"Why not?" he says again.

They take a taxi, an old cream-colored Mercedes. The long, straight streets look bleak in the rain as the taxi's wipers squeak and its dispatching radio fizzes and blurts. They're traveling through parts of the city that they've never seen before—sparse, gray, and modern. It takes twenty minutes to get there. When they arrive she pays the driver and they get out into what seems to be a grimly futuristic landscape. The departure of the taxi leaves them feeling marooned among noisy roads. Strange towers loom at various distances in the rain and more immediately there's a large bowl-shaped structure, apparently made of brushed aluminium, which is the BMW Museum.

Inside the self-conscious modernity feels less alienating, and it is at least warm and dry. She pays for the tickets and then they proceed up a wide ramp into something like a history of the twentieth century told in the form of BMWs.

"I didn't know BMW made planes," she says as they start up the ramp. The first displays are mainly old photos of aircraft.

"Only the engines," István says.

"Okay."

He explains that the famous logo is a sort of stylized propeller, in the blue and white of Bavaria. It was only after the First World War, he says, at a time when Germany wasn't allowed to have an aircraft industry, that the company turned first to motorcycles and then cars.

"You already knew all this, did you?" she says.

"Yes."

"Okay."

They proceed up the ramp.

The whole place has a strangely peaceful atmosphere. It's quite pleasant to stroll along and observe the passage of time expressed in the slowly changing forms and colors of the cars.

The silver of the 1950s.

The bright orange of the '60s.

The beige of the '70s.

The white of the '80s.

And so up and up to the display of electric vehicles at the end.

They stop, sometimes, to read the text that accompanies the exhibits.

Often they stop at the same text and read it together in silence, and then take a second look at the vehicle in question, and then move on without saying anything.

From the summit a long escalator takes them down again and they are reunited with their coats.

"What now?" she says when they emerge into the bleakly monumental landscape and the ongoing rain.

There are no taxis in evidence anywhere.

She wonders if they should go back in and ask somebody to call one for them.

Instead he suggests they take the U-bahn.

She looks doubtful. "Yeah?"

"Why not?"

"Okay," she says, after thinking about it for a moment. "Why not?"

There's a station a few hundred meters away, where the various buildings of the BMW estate turn into the equally vast but visibly older structures of the Olympic Park. The station is marked by an elevated U high above the noisy road that they're walking along. It's also the terminus of the line, which makes it easy for them to know what to do. They board a train that's already there and as they sit on the orange plastic seats waiting for it to leave he wonders how long it's been since she's traveled like this. Although her own family were ordinary middle class, she has been married to her husband for more than fifteen years and it seems unlikely that she's made much use of public transport in that time. Not that she looks out of place or anything—she's wearing skinny jeans, Ugg boots with tidemarks from the snow, a puffer coat. She looks perfectly normal, except for the way she's peering around at things with at least as much interest as she did in the museum.

She sees him looking at her and probably guesses what he's thinking.

"What?" she says.

"Nothing," he says.

More self-conscious now, she just stares at her own reflection in the window opposite her, like everyone else.

There's an alarm sound and the doors slam shut.

"I think we need to get off at Odeonsplatz," he says as the train starts to move, leaning toward her so that she can hear him over its noise.

"Okay," she says.

It's half a dozen stops, and when they arrive at the surface they immediately know where they are—at the corner of the Hofgarten, not far from the Luitpold.

"O*kay*," she says.

"What should we do for lunch?" he asks.

"I don't know. The Italian place?" she suggests.

They sit at their usual table at the Italian place, the one near the front, and she tells the waiter, who knows them, that she'll have what she usually does.

"The same," István says to the waiter, who's pouring fizzy water.

The waiter nods and moves away.

Weeks pass.

Spring arrives in the Hofgarten.

Her husband's sister Mathilde visits him at the hospital and after that has lunch with her in the hotel restaurant with the Michelin star.

"How did you find him?" Helen asks her.

"I was shocked," Mathilde says. "Frankly."

"He's better this week," Helen says. "Last week it was like he wasn't there."

"It was still a bit like that," Mathilde says.

"It was worse last week," Helen says.

Mathilde sighs. "What do the doctors say?"

"They don't say anything."

Helen picks at her Caesar salad, aware that she doesn't look very presentable.

"And how are you?" Mathilde asks her. "Are you okay?"

"Yes, I'm okay."

"You need to look after yourself."

"I know."

"You mustn't let yourself go."

"I know," Helen says.

"It must be hard for you, to be here on your own."

"István's here with me."

"István?"

"Our security driver."

"Okay," Mathilde says, possibly sounding surprised that his presence is enough for Helen to suggest that she's not there "on her own" in the sense that Mathilde obviously meant.

They talk about other things.

Mathilde does most of the talking.

They've always had this slightly awkward way of dealing with each other. Though there's a sort of formal equality between them, as sisters-in-law, Mathilde is of course a generation older and has always treated Helen more like a younger family member, like a niece or something, than as an actual equal.

There has always been a subtle element of pity there too, as if there was something inherently pitiable about Helen's being married to a man so much older than she is.

And then again the pity has always been undercut by a suspicion that Helen was only ever interested in Karl for his money.

And naturally Helen has always resented both the pity and the suspicion.

It's a warm spring day and the glass front of the restaurant has been folded open so that at their table it's almost like being outside.

When the wind blows, which it sometimes does, it rattles the menu cards in their holder.

Mathilde is talking about something else now, about some opera that she saw in Munich once.

Helen nods, pretending to be more interested than she is. Unlike Mathilde, who has a Coke Zero, she's drinking wine, and while Mathilde speaks, she wonders if she should order another. If Mathilde wasn't there she probably wouldn't. She wants another one partly just because Mathilde *is* there, and she's having to listen to her and talk to her, and the wine makes doing that less difficult, and yet the fact that Mathilde is there is also inhibiting her from having another one because she doesn't want her to think that she's an alcoholic.

At that moment a strong gust of wind arrives.

Mathilde has stopped talking.

She has her hands to her face.

"Are you all right?" Helen asks.

Still with her hands at her face, Mathilde nods.

"What is it?" Helen says.

"My eye," Mathilde says.

"Something went in your eye?"

"Yes."

Lowering her hands, Mathilde exposes her face. She's blinking frantically.

For a few moments Helen just watches.

She hasn't touched her glass of still water and she wets a corner of a napkin in it and offers it to Mathilde. "Here," she says.

"Thank you," Mathilde says. She dabs at her eye with the damp corner of the heavy linen napkin.

Helen, waiting, drinks the last of her wine.

"Are you okay?" she asks.

"It's still in there, I think," Mathilde says.

"I have some eyedrops upstairs," Helen says. "They may help."

"Okay," Mathilde says. "Thank you."

As they leave the restaurant Helen tells the waiter that they'll be back in a few minutes and asks him for another glass of the Pouilly-Fumé.

The suite has been made up.

Mathilde lingers in the living room area, with its sofas and eight-seater dining table, while Helen passes through the bedroom to look for the eyedrops in the bathroom beyond.

After a minute she calls for Mathilde to join her.

Mathilde sits on a stool in front of the mirror while Helen squeezes the drops into her eye.

István's stuff was on the marble surface next to one of the sinks. Helen had forgotten about it. Fortunately she had the presence of mind to tidy it away before calling Mathilde through.

"Thank you," Mathilde says.

"Better?"

"I think so."

Mathilde keeps the eye shut while the drops work.

"How is this hotel?" she asks, cautiously opening it again.

"It's fine," Helen says.

"It seems very nice," Mathilde says, and as they pass through the bedroom on their way out she looks around as if she's assessing the place, and perhaps wondering if she should stay there herself the next time she's in Munich. "Whose clothes are those?" she asks.

"What?"

"Whose clothes are those?"

One of the cupboards in the bedroom is open and, plainly visible, a man's clothes are hanging in it.

Helen can't understand why the cupboard is open. She thought that housekeeping always closed the cupboard doors when they did the room.

"I don't know. They must be István's," she says, after failing to think of anything else to say.

"István's?"

"Yes."

"Your driver?"

"Yes."

"What are they doing here?"

"He... keeps some of his clothes here."

"Why?"

"There's more space," Helen says. "His room's quite small."

Not responding to that at all, Mathilde looks in the direction of the neatly made bed and presumably sees that there are personal objects on both of the nightstands.

None of the objects is particularly identifiable as István's—at least not in the time that Mathilde has to look at them before Helen says to her, "We'd better go back to the restaurant. I told them we'd be back in a few minutes."

"How's your eye?" she asks in the lift.

"It's okay, thank you," Mathilde says.

"It still looks a bit pink."

"It's okay."

Helen's new glass of Pouilly-Fumé is waiting on the table, which has been tidied up in the five or ten minutes that they were away.

They're there for another half an hour or so, and during that time it's the opposite of how it was before—Helen does most of the talking, while it's Mathilde who seems distracted and doesn't say much.

Helen has signed for the meal, they have left the restaurant and are on the point of saying goodbye in the lobby when Mathilde says, "I'm sorry, I have to ask you. Are you having some sort of affair with your driver?"

"No," Helen says.

There's something wrong with the way she says it though. It doesn't sound like the truth. She heard that herself. She said it too quickly or something, or the question didn't seem to surprise her enough. Whatever it was, it didn't sound like the truth and Mathilde obviously doesn't believe her.

For a few seconds they just stand there.

"Okay. Goodbye," Mathilde says. "Thank you for lunch."

"Goodbye," Helen says.

She watches Mathilde walk out to where her own driver is waiting for her, and then, a few minutes later, leaves the hotel herself.

When she returns she finds István in the suite watching some business show on CNN. He went out for a few hours so that he wouldn't

be around while Mathilde was there.

"You're wet," he says.

She nods.

She was walking in the Hofgarten when it started to rain. For a while she sheltered in the Diana Pavilion but when the rain didn't stop or even ease off much she walked back and her hair and shoulders and shoes are soaked.

"What happened?" he asks.

"I'm going to have a shower," she says.

"Yes, you should," he says.

"What happened?" he asks her again when she reappears in one of the hotel's quilted dressing gowns.

"Nothing," she says.

"How was your lunch?" he asks.

"Fine."

There's the sound of the rain on the windows, a surprisingly quiet sound given how hard it's still coming down out there.

"Yeah?" he says. "How was..." He's forgotten the name.

"Mathilde," she says.

"Yes."

"She was fine."

"What's she like?"

"She's okay. I don't know her that well."

"What did you talk about?"

"I don't know. About Karl. Why?"

"No reason."

"Are you actually interested in what we talked about?"

"Not really," he says.

She seems upset about something.

"Are you okay?" he asks.

"Yes."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes," she says, and then suggests that, when she's dried her hair, they have gin and tonics in the Jahreszeiten bar.

They're on the second one when she tells him what happened.

"She saw my stuff?" he says.

"Yes."

"What did she say?"

"She asked if we were having an affair."

"And what did you say?"

"No. Obviously."

He looks thoughtful.

"I don't think she believed me," Helen says.

"No?"

"I'm sorry," she says.

"Do you think she'll tell Karl?" he asks her.

"I don't know," she says. "And even if she does, I'm not sure he's in any state to take it in. Let alone do anything about it."

"No," István says, and has a sip of his drink.

6

THE NEW SWIMMING POOL at Ayot St. Peter is finished in time for the summer holidays. There's a week of hot, sunny weather at the end of June and they use it a lot.

Thomas, when his school term finishes in July and he joins them there, hardly uses it at all. Helen sometimes pesters him into putting in an appearance. Wearing a T-shirt and shorts, he sits in the shade with his phone and never stays long. He slips away and they only notice half an hour later that he isn't there. He seems to spend most of the day upstairs in his room.

"What does he *do* in there all day?" István asks.

"I don't know," Helen says.

She goes down the steps into the pool. She's very visibly pregnant now. She sits down in the water, on one of the middle steps.

"He's got his phone," she says. "His iPad. I don't know."

With slow, deliberate movements, she scoops water onto her shoulders.

"I don't know what he does," she says.

She hadn't wanted the usual turquoise tiles for the pool. In the end they went for a sort of sagey tone, with Yorkstone around it to match the paving in front of the Baroque garden pavilion that was already there and that has now been turned into a pool house, with showers and toilets and a fridge full of drinks. To seclude the pool area and shelter it from the wind, she wanted those apple trees that are trained on wires or frames so that they form an almost two-dimensional screen of living vegetation.

"Pleached?" the landscape architect said to her.

"Is that the word?"

"I think that's what you mean."

He told her it would take about ten years to produce that effect to the size she wanted. She tried to find someone who could supply them already fully grown. It was surprisingly difficult, and in the end they had to find another solution.

After her slow swim, she steps out of the water.

István stands up and hands her a towel.

"Thank you," she says.

He stretches on the lounger again and feels for his cigarettes. The wind tries to stop him lighting one and riffles the pages of his book. He's reading *Playing to Win: How Strategy Really Works* by Alan G. Lafley and Roger Martin.

"You okay?" he asks her.

She looks like she's worrying about something.

She nods, drying her neck.

"It's true he shouldn't spend all his time up there," she says.

"Thomas?"

"It's not good for him to spend so much time on his own."

"No."

"I suggested he invite a friend to stay."

"Yeah?"

"He said he didn't want to."

"Okay."

"Why don't you do something with him?" she suggests.

"Yeah?" István says, not particularly trying to hide his surprise. "Like what?"

"I don't know."

She asks him to put some sunblock on her back, and undoes the strap of her bikini top to allow him to do it.

"So?" she says, while he's doing that.

"So?"

"Why don't you do something with him? Spend some time with him."

"Do you think he'd want to do that?"

"What do you mean?"

"He doesn't seem to like me much," István says.

"He's just wary of you," Helen says.

"What does that mean?"

"He's just not sure how to deal with you," she says.

When he has finished her back he straightens up and wipes the excess sunblock onto his own shoulders.

"So?" she says.
"What?"
"Tommy."
"I don't know."
"I'd really like you to spend some time with him," she says. "The new *Planet of the Apes* film is on in Stevenage. He seemed interested in that."
When István approaches him about seeing it, though, Thomas says he doesn't want to.

Later in the summer, some friends of Helen's stay. One of them is her friend the artist, who's quite famous now. While she's there, Helen asks her to spend some time with Thomas. She's known him all his life.
She asks him about school, whether he likes it.
"It's okay," he says.
"It looks like an amazing place."
"Yeah," he says, without enthusiasm or surprise, as if people were always saying that about his school.
"What's your favorite subject?" she asks him.
"I don't know."
"You must have some idea." They're sitting next to each other on the edge of the south front terrace where a few stone steps go down to the lawn.
"English, maybe," he says.
"Okay. What are you doing?" she asks.
"What do you mean?"
"What are you studying? In English."
"Oh," he says. And then, sounding as if he's worried he might not have understood exactly what she meant, "You mean last term?"
"For instance."
"*Hamlet*," he says.
"You were in that once, weren't you?"
"Yes," he says.

The two of them go sketching together a few times. He seems to like doing that, and Helen is pleased that it gets him out of the house, and away from his phone and his tablet. They sketch the follies of the garden—the little Greek temple, the obelisk at the end of the Long Walk, and the grotto with its pebble mosaics of nymphs and satyrs, secluded among willows and irises at the marshy end of the lake.
"How have you been spending the holidays?" she asks him, as they sit there in the shade with their pads.
He tells her that they went on a weeklong sailing trip in the Mediterranean.
"Yes, your mum told me about that," she says. They are both half-immersed in what they're doing—the conversation moves forward slowly, with long pauses, to the sound of their scraping pencils.
"How was it?" she asks.
"It was all right," he says.
She smiles at that. "It sounds amazing. And other than that?" she asks.
"We've mostly been here."
"And what do you do here?"
He shrugs.
"Do you swim in the new pool?"
"Sometimes."
"It's very nice, isn't it? The pool."
"It's all right."
"I love the way they've used the old pavilion." There's a silence and then she says, "What else do you do?"
"Play tennis. Sometimes."
"Yeah? Who do you play with?"
"My mother's husband."
"István?"
"Yes."
"Do you like him?" She doesn't seem particularly interested. She seems focused on her sketch.
"Not really."
Again she speaks after a longish silence, and doesn't seem particularly interested. "Why not?"
"I don't know," Thomas says.
"He's not unkind to you?" she asks.
"Not really."
"So?"
After a long pause, Thomas says, "I don't like the way he's using my mother."

"Using her?"
"Yes."
"What do you mean?"
There's another longish pause. "I don't think he loves her," Thomas says.
The artist, still focused on her picture, sounds only mildly surprised when she says, "Don't you?"
"No."
"Why not?"
"I think he just married her for her money."
"Do you really think that?"
"Don't you?"
"I don't know," the artist says. "I don't know why he married her."
When Thomas doesn't say anything else for a few minutes, she asks to look at what he's done.
He tilts the pad to show her.
"That's nice," she says.

As well as the artist and her partner, another friend of Helen's is staying. She's in the process of getting divorced. One day she and Helen are topless next to the pool. When they see István approaching from the direction of the house they cover themselves.

"Hi," he says.

He lays his things down on the low table next to one of the wooden loungers and takes off his T-shirt. He deliberately took a lounger at some distance from them so that if they want to they can keep talking without feeling that he has to be included. Perhaps to additionally emphasize that, to indicate that there's no need to include him, that in fact he doesn't *want* to be included, he picks up his book.

He doesn't open it though.

He just sits there behind his sunglasses, enjoying the feeling of the warm air on his skin, and looking at the mature beech trees whose upper halves, great windy masses of leaves, are flickering and glittering above the tall trellises that screen the pool area from the rest of the garden.

"What are you reading?" Helen's friend asks him, across the unoccupied loungers between them.

He looks at the cover of the book as if to remind himself. "It's called *Playing to Win*," he says.

"What is it?"

"It's about strategy."

"Is it good?"

"Yeah, it's quite good," he says. "You know. In an American way. There's a lot of bullshit in it. Some interesting things too."

He puts the book down again and takes the small bottle of chilled water that he brought with him and swigs from it.

"He's always reading books like that," he hears Helen say.

Her friend sort of laughs, and they start talking to each other again.

After a few minutes István stands up and tests the water with his toes, aware of the voices of Helen and her friend at the other end of the pool.

There's a wind that makes it slightly daunting, the idea of going into the cold water. The warming system isn't on. They haven't used it yet, except to test it on the day the pool was handed over. There was a feeling that, this being England, it was important to have the possibility of heating the water, otherwise they might end up using the pool for only a few weeks a year.

Some leaves and other floating debris have accumulated in one corner.

Mr. Szymanski usually fishes them out with his net.

It's one of Mr. Szymanski's jobs now, to do that.

For some reason he hasn't this morning.

Maybe the half-naked women scared him off.

István squats in his trunks and, leaning down to the water, removes the debris with his hand.

He wonders what the Szymanskis make of these people, swanning around with almost no clothes on.

He wonders what they make of the two women sharing a bed, Helen's friend the artist and that other woman who arrived with her. At first István thought they were just friends, but then, when Helen put them in the same room, he said to her, "Are they...?"

"Yes," Helen said.

"Okay," he said. "I didn't know."

"What?"

"That she was like that. Your friend."

"Yes," Helen said. "She's *like that*."

"Sure. Okay."

"That's okay with you, is it?"

"Sure," he said.

He wonders what the Szymanskis make of it though. They must know about it. Mrs. Szymanski does the rooms. They're quite religious, the Szymanskis, even though they're also quite young. They go to the Church of the Holy Family in Welwyn Garden City every Sunday.

It's nearly four when he leaves the pool area and walks back toward the house. About an hour earlier, the artist and her partner also showed up, and soon after that all the women had their tops off again.

Helen had spoken to him about this the day her friends arrived. She asked him if he minded if they did that.

He shrugged and said, "No. Why would I?"

"I just want to be sure you'll be comfortable with it," she said.

"Okay," he said.

"So it won't make you uncomfortable?" she asked.

"No," he said.

In fact they were quite shy about it when he was around. There seemed to be a feeling that there was safety in numbers and they tended to do it most often when all four of them were there, like now. And actually there *was* something almost intimidating about it then—or at least there was a feeling of not being allowed to look that was troublesome after a while because something very deep inside him wanted to look. It took a deliberate effort not to, and that effort became exhausting quite quickly so that in a way the situation did make him uncomfortable after all.

He *does* look, of course, without seeming to, and over the past few days, he's taken fairly thorough stock of the situation. The artist's partner has the nicest ones. She's well aware of that and always seems to be the first to lose her top. (She's also by some way the youngest of the four of them.) The artist herself has a somewhat unfortunate, saggy pair, to the extent that István finds himself sincerely admiring her unselfconscious willingness to show them. It doesn't seem to matter to her what they look like, and there's something attractive about that too. Helen's are the largest, and probably would be even if she wasn't pregnant. Her friend who's getting divorced, on the other hand, has almost nothing there at all.

The sound of their laughter follows him along the path, on either side of which bees are visiting the bushy lavender.

He goes in at the garden room door and then down a cool, marble-floored passageway lined at intervals with stone busts until he arrives at the entrance hall of the house—an enormously tall space where the main stairs go up and paintings hang on the walls, one over the other, so that the highest ones are hardly visible from ground level. Mostly they seem to be portraits of eighteenth-century people, some of them with dogs or horses. He has no idea who they are, or what sort of lives they had. The paintings, he assumes, must have come with the house whenever Helen's previous husband acquired the place.

Still smelling faintly of suncream, he is standing there in his flip-flops looking up at them when a voice says, "Hello."

It's Helen's friend who's getting divorced.

"Hey," he says.

She's wearing a T-shirt now, and sandals. Her hair is still damp.

"Which is your favorite?" she asks, standing next to him.

"My favorite?"

She nods.

"Of these pictures?"

"Yes."

"I don't know," he says. He looks at them and tries, without much enthusiasm, to identify the one he likes the most. "That one maybe?" he says, pointing.

"Yeah?"

"Maybe."

"You're obviously more sentimental than you look," she says, smiling at him.

It hadn't occurred to him that the picture he pointed to might be thought of as sentimental. Now he feels slightly embarrassed.

"So which is yours?" he asks, with a vague feeling of wanting to turn the tables on her.

"My favorite picture?"

"Yes."

"None of these," she says. There's a picture in her room upstairs, she tells him, that she's always loved.

She asks him if he wants to see it.

He hesitates for a moment and then says, "Yeah, all right."

She's already started up the stairs and he follows her.

The stairs divide and turn under a milkily translucent dome. Then there's the upstairs corridor stretching to a window at the end. She stops at one of the doors and lets him go in first.

He doesn't know this room.

"That's it," she says, shutting the door. "The one over the bed."

"Okay," he says.

It's a landscape, quite small and dark. He's not sure why she likes it so much.

"It's nice," he says.

"I love it."

"So this is your room?"

"It is."

He steps to the window and looks out—the old stable yard with the Szymanskis' VW Polo parked outside their front door, and farther away some of the south lawn and part of the lake. It's strange to see them from this unfamiliar angle.

She says, "I'm going to make a spliff. Do you want some?"

He's not sure how to answer that.

He turns and sees her sitting in the middle of the wide bed.

She already has the equipment out from somewhere and her fingers are at work with the paper and tobacco, are holding the lighter flame to a small knob of hashish.

"It's a view of Lake Como," she says.

"The picture?"

"M-hm."

"Okay."

"That's one of the reasons I like it."

"All right."

"Have you been there?" she asks.

"No," he admits.

"You should go."

"All right," he says again.

To leave now would seem unfriendly, he thinks, and he sits on the only seat, a wing chair in faded yellow silk, and watches her as she finishes making the spliff.

He's not sure if he should smoke any of it. Smoking that stuff often makes him feel disconnected from things in a way that he doesn't like.

It's different from being drunk, which also makes him feel disconnected from things and which he sometimes does like.

The difference is maybe that when he's drunk he doesn't care that he's disconnected from things, it doesn't seem to be a problem, whereas when he's stoned it somehow does.

"Do you want to start it?" she asks, holding out the finished spliff and in her other hand the lighter.

"No, you do it," he says.

She leans for the ashtray and places it between her bare feet on the bed and then lights the spliff.

The window is already open.

From somewhere below they hear the voices of the Szymanskis, speaking Polish.

She has a few tokes and then holds out the spliff for him.

He stands to take it.

He's not sure why he's doing this.

He knows he probably shouldn't.

After a few inhalations he's already feeling it strongly.

The Szymanskis' voices, still there, sound more immediate than they did, and also there are these weird moments when he thinks he's able to understand what they're saying, even though they're still speaking Polish. They seem to be having some sort of argument.

In his own dealings with them there's a slight edginess now, especially with Mr. Szymanski. When they both worked for Karl Nyman they were equals. Now in some significant sense they're not, and quite how they should speak to each other, how they should interact, is something that they're still working out.

The Szymanskis' voices aren't there anymore.

There are other sounds now.

He looks at Helen's friend again.

She's lying on her back on the bed, and looking at her he imagines, with the intense vividness of being stoned, fucking her there and then. It's almost embarrassing, how vividly he imagines it.

He imagines pulling down her bikini bottoms and licking her.

He imagines pulling the T-shirt up to her shoulders as he fucks her.

"Do you want this?" he says, holding out the spliff. There's still about half of it left.

She turns her head to look at him.

Then she lifts her hand and he passes it to her.

For a moment he wonders whether to actually do something, to stroke her leg or something like that.

"I should go," he says.

She doesn't speak for quite a few seconds. It's like the silence stretches on and on. "Okay," she finally says.

"Thanks for showing me the picture," he says.

She laughs, he isn't sure why.

"Okay," he says, after what feels like another massively extended silence. "See you."

He opens the door and leaves.

And just as when he was in there the whole world outside that room hardly seemed to exist, now that he has left it's the opposite, and everything that happened in there, including the thoughts that he had, seems as vague and insubstantial as a half-forgotten dream.

His birthday happens while Helen's friends are staying. She invites some other people too. Other friends of hers mostly. None of István's own friends are there. She wanted him to invite some and though he said he would, in the end he didn't. He spends most of the evening talking to the Italian hedge fund manager who owns the next-largest private house in the area.

He seems to be more at ease with the Italian than he is with Helen's friends. The two of them have played tennis a few times and once

István went to a poker evening over there. When she asked István why he liked the Italian, he told her that the man "respected" him—with the obvious implication that her own friends somehow didn't. And it's true that the Italian seems to find it easier to talk to him than most of her friends do. He has a way of speaking to him, she's noticed, simply as one man to another, whereas her friends, when they make an effort with István, tend to overthink things in ways that make them seem patronizing and insincere.

She finds the Italian uninteresting herself, with all his talk of money and politics.

He's waving a huge cigar around.

István has one too, she sees.

They're standing next to a large stone planter in the shape of an urn with a spray of vegetation in it.

She catches István's eye and smiles at him, and he lifts the hand holding the cigar in acknowledgment. The Italian also looks momentarily in her direction and then they pick up their talk again.

People are mostly standing at one end of the terrace, holding drinks and plates of finger food and talking, although some have wandered farther away, down an avenue of flaming torches that leads toward the disappearing lake. There's a light show projected onto the mellow Palladian façade of the house and the DJ is playing ambient hip-hop, a warm wash of sound that sits nicely with the dusky light. Later he'll do something more lively for the dancing.

When István opens his presents there's oohing and aahing and occasional applause.

Helen has provided something for Thomas to give.

"Go on," she says, sort of nudging him forward with it.

"Thank you, Thomas," István says. "I wonder what this is?"

Some people laugh. As is obvious from its shape, the present is a tennis racket.

István has another sip of champagne and then starts on the paper.

"It's a Bosworth Tour," Helen says, when he has unwrapped it. "It improves performace by up to twenty percent."

"Maybe you should use it, then," István says to Thomas. Again some people laugh. "Only joking," he says. He stands up and spreads his arms.

Thomas takes a single unwilling step forward and then just stands there stiffly and passively while István hugs him.

"Oh, for god's sake give him a proper hug!" Helen shouts, through the embarrassed patter of applause.

"Why do you have to do this?" she says to Thomas when István has let him go. "It's pathetic. Why can't you just hug him? Is that too much to ask?"

Thomas doesn't say anything.

He disappears soon after that.

Helen keeps her own present to the end, knowing that it will be a hard act to follow. When there's nothing else left she hands István a small package and he tears carefully at the wrapping while she waits, looking nervous.

There's an expectant hush.

"This is very well wrapped," István says, laughing, as he struggles with it.

"Should I help?" she asks.

"No," he says.

A few seconds later he has it open.

"Whoa," he says when he sees what it is. "Seriously?"

"I found it at auction," she says. "In Geneva."

"Wow."

"I had to bid quite aggressively," she says.

"I bet you did," he says.

There's sustained applause while István stands and kisses and then hugs her.

"Thank you," he says, as if they were alone together.

She just nods.

The next morning, she knocks on Thomas's door.

"I'm sorry," she says.

Even though it's nearly noon, Thomas's room is dim and stuffy. He's sitting on the bed doing something on his phone.

"For what?" he says.

"You know what," she says. "How I spoke to you last night."

Thomas doesn't say anything. He's still looking at his phone.

"I shouldn't have spoken to you like that," she says. "Not in front of everybody. I'm sorry."

"It's okay"

"Thank you."

Heavily pregnant, still panting slightly from the stairs, she sits down on the end of the bed.

She puts out a hand toward him.

He looks up for a moment but doesn't take it.

"Are you okay?" she asks.

He shrugs.

"Talk to me."

"About what?"

"What's on your mind?"

"Nothing in particular."

"Why wouldn't you hug István yesterday?"

The way he looks at her when she says that makes her understand that it would be easier to stop talking about it.

Even so, she says, "Why wouldn't you hug him?"

"I didn't want to."

"Why not?"

When he doesn't answer that, when he just looks at his phone again, she says, more impatiently, "Why can't you just accept that this has happened?"

"What?"

"That he's part of our family now."

"*Our* family?"

"Yes," she insists.

There's a tense silence.

"What's he done to you?" she says. "That's what I don't understand. What has he *done* to you? He wanted to be friends with you. I know he did."

"It's not what he's done to me," Thomas says.

"What then?"

"It's what he's done to *you*."

"What does *that* mean?"

"I think you know."

"No, I don't," she says.

"Whatever," he says.

When Helen's friends leave the house feels empty for a few days. István finds that he slightly misses the sound of tipsy female laughter on the terrace in the evening, and the sense he had, when the four women were there, that, as the only man, he had a sort of harem.

On the other hand, he enjoys having solitude at the pool again.

While the Szymanskis are at the Church of the Holy Family on Sunday morning he swims naked, sharing the water with a few floating leaves and then stretching himself on a lounger and letting the sun slowly dry him.

"Hello," Helen's voice says, and for a moment he feels marginally, and pleasantly, more aware of his own nakedness, stretched out on the lounger under the empty sky.

He still has his eyes shut.

He murmurs something.

"Are you and Tommy going to play tennis?" she asks.

"No," he says.

For a while he and Thomas played tennis most days. That's stopped now. There was no discussion about it, no actual decision. István was away in London for a few days and that was it—the first morning after his return they didn't meet at the court and there was an unspoken understanding that they never would again. István always won anyway, when they played. Toward the end Thomas stopped even pretending to try. His aim didn't seem to be so much to win himself as to show that he didn't care that István was winning. It was like he was trying to undermine the value of winning itself with his indifference, so that it was almost as if there were two different games being played, one in which the aim was to win at tennis, which István himself was still playing, and another in which the aim was to mock and devalue that objective, to deny its validity as an achievement, which Thomas was playing, and it seemed obvious to István that the reason Thomas was playing that second game was that he had no hope of winning the first one—and that in that sense the two games were really a single game, the second being just a continuation of the first by other means.

Helen doesn't seem to have noticed any of that though.

Her friends were around, she had other things to think about.

"Are you okay?" she asks.

"Sure," István says, still lying there with his eyes shut. For a few seconds neither of them speaks. There's the sound of the wind in the trees. Then he says, "You?"

"M-hm."

He's not sure whether she's standing, or whether she has sat down on one of the other loungers.

"Do you have any plans for today?" she asks.

"Plans? No."

"I thought we might have a pub lunch," she says.

"Okay," he says.

"Yeah?"

"Sure."

"The Red Lion?" she suggests.

"Sure," he says.

"I'll ask Tommy if he wants to come."

"Okay."

"I mean, I know he won't."

"No."

"I still have to ask."

"Yeah."

"I think."

He sits up and places his long feet on the Yorkstone. The gray-greenish water sways in the pool, trying and failing to reflect the proper forms of things. For a second he feels dizzy. He lets it pass and then opens his eyes again. His dick looks small and smooth between his thighs. He lifts his watch from the table and squints at it.

"What time do you want to leave?" he asks her.

"In about an hour?" she says.

At the end of September István's mother arrives. He picks her up from the airport in the Bentley and drives her to the house. Most of the drive is on the highway, then there are country roads for a few minutes. When they arrive he shows her up to her room. "I hope this will be okay," he says.

With a sort of satisfaction, she looks out one of the windows and takes in the view of the south lawn and the lake.

"Do you want to say hi to Helen?" he asks her.

"Yes," she says.

They go downstairs and find Helen doing yoga.

Helen and his mother hug and exchange smiles—his mother doesn't speak much English, so there isn't much to say.

"I'm sorry," Helen says, meaning how she's dressed, in sweaty sports stuff.

"It's okay," István's mother says.

She seems to quite like Helen, though there's a wariness in the way she interacts with her that's not entirely explicable in terms of the linguistic difficulties.

She is anyway an undemanding houseguest.

She spends much of the time sitting with a book, either in a wicker chair on the terrace when the weather allows, or in her room.

At meals she eats quietly, answering politely when Helen asks her things and István translates as necessary.

She has few questions herself.

She makes no specific demands.

She and István take walks in the garden together, and spend a day in Cambridge, and on one occasion he takes her for lunch at the Red Lion.

Thomas of course is away at school and she only sees him when he spends a weekend at Ayot St. Peter. He's there for little more than twenty-four hours and for much of that time he isn't in evidence. He appears at meals and that's about it.

He leaves on the Sunday afternoon.

The next morning after breakfast István knocks on his mother's door.

"Yes," says her voice from inside.

She's on the chaise longue, with a book.

"Yes?" she says.

"You had breakfast?" István asks her.

She says that she has.

Then, after marking the page, she puts down her book and asks him to shut the door.

From the way she does it he knows that there's something specific and important that she wants to talk to him about.

He shuts the door and turns to her again.

"What is it?"

"Thomas doesn't like you," she says.

For a few moments he doesn't say anything, perhaps surprised that she was able to see that after spending probably less than an hour in total in Thomas's presence. Then he says, "Yes, I know. Is it that obvious?"

"Yes, it is," she says.

"Okay."

"Doesn't that worry you?" she asks.

"Worry me?"

"Yes." She looks at him for a few more seconds and then says, "You told me that his father left everything to him."

Thoughtful and serious now, István sits down on the end of the chaise longue. "Yes," he says. "He gets it when he's twenty-five."

"Everything?"

"Yes."

A window is open and from somewhere outside there's the sound of Mr. Szymanski using a leaf blower.

"Until then Helen looks after it for him," István says.

"She can do what she wants with it?" his mother asks. "The money or whatever it is."

"It's mostly shares."

"She can do what she wants with it?"

"No, not whatever she wants. There's a lawyer in London."

He and Helen have been over this a few times. Whenever Helen wants to do anything—sell shares or other assets, make a new investment—she has to talk to the lawyer in London. "To make sure it's in line with the terms of the trust," István says to his mother.

"Her first husband really left her nothing for herself?"

"No."

"Nothing?"

"I don't think so."

"That's strange, isn't it?"

"Maybe."

"Why not? Why didn't he?"

"I don't know," István says.

He doesn't tell her about the incident in Munich in which Karl's sister saw István's stuff in Helen's suite and obviously suspected something. That she might have said something to Karl about it seemed entirely possible.

István's mother is still looking straight at him.

He says, "She has the income from the... shares or whatever. She can do what she wants with that. Until Thomas is twenty-five. Then he gets that too."

His mother says, "So what happens then, when Thomas is twenty-five?"

"Well, I told you—"

"No, what happens to Helen? Specifically. If she was left nothing herself."

"I don't know. I suppose the idea is that he'll look after her."

"Is that the idea?"

"I suppose."

"And will he?"

"Why wouldn't he?"

"And you?" she says. "Will he look after you?"

He stands up and goes to one of the windows. A cloud has covered the sun. The water of the lake looks dark and still.

"Have you thought of that?"

"Yes, I've thought of that," he says. Which is true, although it's also true that he has more often avoided thinking about it.

There's a long silence.

"You need to do something," she says.

"I know," he says.

7

THE HOTEL IS ABOUT HALFWAY up Park Lane. Roddy meets him in the lobby and István follows him along a gold-carpeted corridor toward the doors at the far end and the expanding sound of several hundred voices talking.

A wall of noise meets them. Numerous tables under only slightly less-numerous chandeliers is the impression that he has as Roddy leads him among them.

There are some familiar faces here and there, faces he knows from the TV news. It's strange to see them in this setting, just having dinner like normal people.

They arrive at a table on the far side of the room and István waits while Roddy leans down and says something to the minister.

István knows him by sight, of course.

"Hey," the minister says.

He's a few years younger than István, and looks younger still.

István shakes his hand, envying his very thick hair.

"You sitting here?" the minister asks, indicating the empty place next to him.

"Yeah, I think so," István says.

"Have a seat, then."

As István sits Roddy is already moving away.

"Thanks for coming," the minister says.

"Sure," István says. "I'm happy to do what I can."

"Well, we appreciate it."

"And sorry I'm late."

The minister shrugs tolerantly. The starters have already been served and he resumes eating while István makes momentary eye contact with Helen, who's on the far side of the table.

Sorry, he mouths.

He isn't sure if she sees it.

She's speaking to the person next to her, and the line of sight is anyway partly obscured by a tall floral arrangement.

There are about a dozen people around the table, all experiencing the slight tension that comes from the presence of fame, or perhaps just power, since the minister is hardly a household name or even a particularly familiar face.

He's eating his goat's cheese whatever with the focused and almost hearty energy, the ultimately humorless determination, that he probably brings to most of the things he does in life. Like entertaining the other people at the table, which is obviously his job for the evening. He says to István, "So you're doing this development in Rainham, is that right?"

Roddy or someone must have primed him about it.

"Yes. That's right," István says.

"Tell me about that."

The minister listens, eating, while István, temporarily neglecting his own food, tells him about the Rainham project.

"Sounds ambitious," the minister says.

"We didn't see any point in messing about," István says.

"No," the minister agrees. "Sure."

István takes out his phone and says, "Actually, I have some pictures."

He scrolls past hundreds of thumbnails, mainly of Jacob.

"Who's that young fella?" the minister asks.

"That's my son," István tells him.

"How old?"

"Seven next month."

"Handsome like his dad."

István laughs. "If you say so."

He finds the pictures he's looking for, and holding the phone where the minister can see it, starts to flick through the full-size images.

"So these are?" the minister asks, not quite understanding. The images are computer-generated but so realistic that it takes a moment to work that out. They show a group of very large buildings that seem to be set on a network of tree-lined canals. People stroll along the canalside paths and congregate on café terraces in the piazzas formed by the buildings' sides.

"These are just visualizations," István explains.

"Okay."

"There's nothing there at the moment."

"Looks like quite a project," the minister says.

"Yeah, it is."

They talk for a few more minutes, and then they're interrupted by the arrival of the main course, at which point the minister turns to the person on the other side of him and István finds himself having to engage with his own other neighbor, an elderly lady who wants something done about immigration.

She's embarrassed when she understands, after a minute or two, that István is himself a foreigner.

"I don't mean you, of course," she says, putting a hand on his arm.

"No, of course not," István says.

"We need people like you."

"Well," he says. "It's nice of you to say so."

"You're not the problem."

"I hope not."

"So what do you do?" she asks him, perhaps feeling that she needs to show some interest in him now, to prove that she doesn't wish he wasn't there.

He tells her that he's a property developer.

"What does that actually involve?" she asks.

He explains what he does and tells her about his latest project in Rainham.

"Which is where exactly?"

"It's in London."

She seems surprised. "Is it?"

"It's sort of beyond Dagenham."

"*Beyond* Dagenham?" she says. "Is that still London?"

She might be joking and he tries not to take the question too seriously—he's learned the hard way how often that spells social disaster here.

She says, "So what is it exactly, this project of yours in…"

"Rainham."

"Yes."

He tells her and then with slightly disconcerting directness she asks him if it's his own money that he uses to finance his developments.

He says it's mostly loans.

"Loans?"

"Yes."

When she asks who lends him such large amounts of money he's vague and eventually excuses himself for a visit to the men's room.

The next hour passes slowly. There's some entertainment in the form of a well-known newsreader talking jokily for twenty minutes, and then there's an auction involving various items of Tory memorabilia as well as the opportunity to play tennis with the foreign secretary or have lunch with Damian Green. Making sure that the minister notices, István puts in a few losing bids.

He and Helen leave at about eleven.

"Well, that was awful," Helen says, as Samuel drives them home.

"You seemed to be having an okay time," István says.

"I always seem to be having an okay time."

"True."

"I promise you," she says, with a laugh, "I was *not* having an okay time."

"I'm sorry," István says.

"Did you get what you wanted?" she asks.

"I'm not sure," he says.

"What did Roddy say?"

"He seemed to think it went okay."

"All right."

Samuel drops them in front of the Cheyne Walk house.

As they walk up the stairs he says, "Do you want to sleep alone?"

"Yes, I think so," Helen says.

"Okay," he says.

For the last few years they've had separate rooms.

After saying good night to her he doesn't go directly to his own, though. He walks up to the floor above, where Jacob and the nanny have theirs. His mother also lives on that floor, and although it's eleven thirty he knows that she will still be awake.

He knocks on her door.

"Yes," her voice says.

She puts down her book. "So?" she asks.

He shrugs. "I don't know," he says.

"You talked to him?"

"Yes."

"What did he say?"

He tells her, in summary, what the minister said.

"So will he help you?" she asks.

"I think so."

"You think so?"

"I hope so."

"He didn't promise anything?"

"Not exactly. That's not how things work here."

He's standing at the window looking down at the silent deserted street and the dark trees of Embankment Gardens on the other side of it. The air is heavy with moisture. The streetlamps have faint halos.

"Was everything okay here?" he asks.

"Of course," his mother says.

"He went down okay?"

"Yes."

"I'm sorry," he says, "that I wasn't here."

"I said you had important things to do. He understands that. He understands that you have important things to do."

"Yeah," István says. "I'm going to look in on him."

"Okay."

The night-light is on in Jacob's room, filling it with strange shadows.

Stepping in, István wonders if it might be too warm in there, and indeed his son has thrown off the duvet.

He moves to the radiator and turns it down a little. He must have a word with the nanny about that, he thinks. She always puts it up too high.

At nine the next morning he walks to the office. It isn't far from the house. It's near the south end of Albert Bridge, quite high up in a modern building with views of the river in two directions. He stands in the lobby waiting for the elevator.

When he was putting together his first project, he took a single suite of rooms in the building. Then, as the business expanded, he added space until now he has a whole floor, the second from the top. There are about forty of them working there these days, and they're negotiating to add the floor above, which they'll need when they hire the new people to handle the Rainham project.

The Rainham project will be transformative, and for the last year or so he has devoted himself to it—acquiring the land, doing the designs, doing them again, sorting out the planning permissions, looking into various transport improvements, lining up the outside investors who will be needed—Roddy, an experienced project finance lawyer, was hired mainly to help with that—and dealing with all the other things that are necessary for an undertaking on this scale.

The elevator arrives at the eleventh floor.

"Morning," he says to Rachel.

"Morning," she says.

"How are you?" he asks her as he walks past. He has a takeout coffee in his hand.

She nods.

His own office is at the end of the corridor.

The most notable item in it is a large model of the Rainham project. He likes to look at it when he has a few minutes to spare.

He takes off his coat and lifts the lid from his coffee.

Noor will be in soon to go through his diary with him. He looks at his watch and decides he has time for a cigarette.

Sliding open the glass door he steps onto the terrace.

From up there, London shimmers into the distance. More immediately, the river takes the quiet autumn light and the gray trees of Battersea Park look like something from the model on the table inside. There's a tranquil murmur of traffic. He lights his cigarette and has a sip of his coffee, thinking of his interaction with the minister last night. It was to do with the planning application for the Rainham project. Someone had messed that up by including some out-of-date numbers—in itself a trivial thing. The problem was that it meant the whole application would have to be put in again, which meant in turn that it would miss the deadline for escaping the new taxes, which would in turn mean additional millions in tax liabilities, enough to potentially put the entire project's viability in question. For a few terrible days last month it seemed like the whole thing might actually fail. It was Roddy's idea to try to speed up the planning process by speaking to the minister, to see if that sort of intervention from on high might push it through in time, and also to make a simultaneous donation to the minister's party, to "help him look favorably on the matter," as Roddy put it himself.

For Jacob's seventh birthday Helen organizes a party and invites some of his friends from school. They had hoped to have it at least partly in the garden. The weather prevents that so it mainly happens in the second-floor drawing room, with most of the furniture pushed to the sides.

There are professional performers—singers and magicians—and a treasure hunt that takes in much of the lower part of the house.

Thomas is in London for the weekend and makes a short appearance. István didn't even know he was around until he sees him at the food table—out of place among the excitedly lit-up children and increasingly tipsy parents (there's champagne alongside the kids' drinks,

for those who want it, which is, in the end, almost everyone).

"Hello, Thomas," István says.

"Hello," Thomas says.

"You okay?"

Thomas nods.

"How's Oxford?" István asks him.

"It's okay," Thomas says.

These days they don't see each other very often. Even during the university vacations Thomas doesn't spend much time in London, and when he does, he tends to keep to his own room on the fifth floor and is rarely seen in the other parts of the house.

After their encounter at the food table he soon disappears again and István finds himself talking to one of the mothers there, the attractive one he noticed earlier.

They eat cake together, standing near the open double doors that separate one half of the space from the other.

"I hope you haven't got anything too valuable in here," she laughs, as whooping seven-year-olds swoop and jostle around them.

"We took the most vulnerable stuff out," István tells her.

"Very wise," she says.

In the aftermath, István and Jacob wind down with some Lego—the large fire station set that was a present from one of his friends. Mostly it's István doing it. "I want you to help," he says. "I don't want to end up doing it on my own."

"Okay," Jacob says.

"You said you wanted to do this."

"I do want to."

"Well, let's do it, then."

As per the instructions, they're making the fire engine first.

István shows Jacob a red plastic piece and asks him to find two more like it, and Jacob starts to search.

He soon loses interest though.

After an initial phase of eagerly hunting for the pieces that they need, he silently detaches himself from the process until István, pausing for a moment, sees him sitting on a sofa and looking at something else entirely.

"Hey," István says.

Jacob looks up.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm looking at this."

"I thought we were doing this."

Jacob puts down the thing he was looking at and half-heartedly joins István on the floor again, where the Lego pieces are scattered.

That's the situation when Helen puts her head around the door. "Tommy and I are popping out for something to eat," she says.

"Okay," István says, without looking up from what he's doing.

"Probably just Byron on King's Road," Helen says.

"I thought he was vegan," István says.

"They have plant-based options."

"Okay."

"Do you want anything?"

"No, thanks."

"We won't be long."

"Okay," István says again.

She seems to be about to leave, and then she says, "It's seven o'clock."

"I know," István says.

She means it's time for Jacob to have his bath.

Saturday is the nanny's day off, otherwise she would already have appeared to do that.

Sort of engrossed in the Lego now, István persists with it for a while longer and then, after a surprised look at his watch, takes Jacob upstairs.

While the tub is filling he asks him if he enjoyed his party.

"Yes," Jacob says.

"Was fun, wasn't it?"

"Yes," Jacob says again.

"What was your favorite part?"

Taking the question very seriously, Jacob thinks for a few seconds and then says it was probably the treasure hunt.

"Yeah, I liked that too," István tells him, testing the water with his hand.

While Jacob is in the bath, István tidies his room, picking toys up from the floor and putting them away, and arranging the stuffed animals on the pillows.

Jacob is just putting on his pajamas when István's mother arrives with the warm milk.

That happens every night.

Jacob doesn't like the warm milk.

István's mother insists on it though.

"Does it have to be *warm*?" he asks her.

"Yes, it does," she says.

"Why?"

"It just does. Now drink it."

She's stricter with him than István is.

"Will you tell me a story?" Jacob asks. The question isn't addressed to her. It's addressed to his father.

"A story?" István says.

"Yes," Jacob says.

"What sort of story?"

"About when you were a soldier."

"When I was a soldier?" István says, seating himself next to the bed.

His mother is still there, waiting for the empty glass.

Since Jacob found out that István was once a soldier he has been keen to hear more about it.

Slightly unwillingly at first, István told him a few things.

"What about it?" he says now.

"Just anything."

"Drink the milk," István's mother says.

Jacob looks at his father, who nods.

"I don't like it," Jacob says.

"If you finish it," István offers, "I'll tell you a story about when I was a soldier."

"A proper story?" Jacob wants to know.

István smiles. "What do you mean, a proper story?" he asks.

"At least five minutes."

"Okay."

"And new material."

"New material?"

"Yes."

"You mean something you haven't heard before?"

Jacob nods.

"Okay," István agrees, and while Jacob takes the milk in two or three unenthusiastic swallows he tries to think of something to tell him.

He ends up describing the day they went to Al-Suwaira, the day they took water to the Ukrainians there.

"Was anyone hurt?" Jacob asks.

"A few people," István tells him.

"Was anyone killed?"

István shakes his head.

"Were you hurt?" Jacob wants to know.

"No," István says. "I wasn't hurt. I was fine."

"And then what happened?"

"We fought them off, and went on."

"To deliver the water?"

"That's right. Only some of the tankers had holes in them," István says.

"Bullet holes?"

"Yes."

Jacob laughs at that for some reason.

"Why is it funny?" István asks him, smiling.

"I don't know," he says.

"That was more than five minutes."

"Can I be a soldier when I grow up?" Jacob asks.

"If you want," István says. "I don't think you should be, though."

"Why not?"

"I just don't."

"What should I be, then?"

"I don't know. What do you want to be?"

Jacob takes a few moments to think about it. "A fireman," he says.

The Lego set, obviously. István smiles. "Yeah?"

With his head on the pillow, Jacob nods.

"Okay," István says, still smiling at him, and enjoying the fact that he knows very well that his son will not be a fireman, that he'll be something altogether more exalted than that. When he himself was Jacob's age, of course, it would have seemed like an appropriate

ambition for him, something that might actually happen, and part of the enjoyment he experiences now is to do with the feeling of progress involved in knowing that jobs like fireman have dropped out of the field of possibility for his family. Already he sometimes idly wonders what his son will actually be, what position he will actually occupy in the world. There seems to be no limit to what is possible there. And whose achievement is that, he thinks, turning off the light and slipping quietly out of the room, if not his own?

Sometimes he picks Jacob up from school himself. The school isn't far from his office. It's a five-minute walk along the river. Jacob is always happy to see him when he appears there at the end of the day, when he surprises him by not being the nanny, or Samuel in the Mercedes.

Sometimes, when the weather is nice, they walk in Battersea Park for a while, and sometimes they just make their way home across the bridge.

Arriving on the Chelsea side Jacob often wants to stop and look at the statue of the boy and the dolphin that's there, on a promontory of paving stones at the end of Oakley Street.

He seems fascinated by that.

Once he asked István why the boy was naked.

"I don't know," István said.

Occasionally, if they feel like walking some more, they'll stroll up to the King's Road and do some shopping.

One afternoon, when the two of them are walking in Battersea Park, Jacob says, "Can we get a dog?"

"You want a dog?" István says.

"Yes."

"We can think about it, I suppose. What sort of dog do you want?"

"I don't know."

"What about that one?" István points to a brown Labrador with a stick in its mouth, walking toward them. "Do you like that one?"

Jacob nods and asks the owner of the Labrador if he can pat it.

The owner, an older lady, says unsmilingly that he can.

She and István exchange nods.

Jacob pats the dog's head.

"Say thank you," István says.

"Thank you," Jacob says to the lady, and then they move on, progressing slowly along one of the main axes of the park, an asphalt path lined at intervals with the massive bulbous trunks of plane trees.

Seeing someone stoop to pick up dogshit István says, "You have to do that, you know. If you have a dog."

Jacob makes a face.

"You have to," István tells him.

"Why?"

"Otherwise the whole park would be... you know."

"What?"

"There'd be dog poo everywhere."

"No there wouldn't," Jacob says.

"Yes there would."

"The rain would wash it away."

"Well yeah, maybe eventually," István says. "But before that the whole place would be... It would be horrible. So you have to pick it up."

"I don't want to do that," Jacob says.

"If you have a dog you have to," István tells him.

"Then I don't want a dog."

The way he says it makes István laugh. "Seriously?"

At that moment his phone rings.

"Yeah?" he says, answering it.

It's Roddy, who says they may have a problem.

"What sort of problem?" István asks him.

"Have you seen the *Times* website?"

"No."

Sounding very tense, Roddy tells him that there's a story on there about István and the minister—about how István sat next to the minister at a party fundraiser, made a substantial donation to the party, and less than two months after that received expedited planning permission for a major property development in Rainham that had been discussed at the fundraising dinner. The expedited planning permission would potentially save the development millions of pounds in tax liabilities.

"Is that a problem?" István asks.

"Yes, it is," Roddy says.

"Why?"

"Why?"

"Yes," István says.

Jacob is shouting for his attention.

István waves at him distractedly and listens while Roddy tells him how terrible it looks for him to be associated with a political scandal at this point, just when they're trying to get the outside investors to formally sign up. The idea is that István will put in half of the initial investment, and that the other half will come from various outside investors. "I've already heard from a few of them," Roddy says.

"And?"

"They're upset. They don't want to be associated with something like that. Particularly the Qataris. They're very sensitive about that sort of thing."

Jacob, two plane trees away now, seems to be asking someone else if he can pat their dog.

István walks toward him while Roddy explains that the outside investors were already waiting impatiently for István's promised share of the investment funds to appear, "And now this," he says.

"Yeah," István says. He smiles tensely at the dog's owner and indicates to Jacob that it's okay if he pats it.

"There are two things we need to do immediately," Roddy is saying now.

"Okay."

"We need those funds, and we need them this week," Roddy says. "Otherwise we may start losing people."

"I understand," István says.

"And I think we also need some positive PR," Roddy says.

"What do you mean?"

"To push back against all the negative shit of this political scandal story."

"I see."

"We need some positive stuff out there at this point."

"Okay. Like what?"

"Just some positive PR. Some puff pieces. A Sunday newspaper interview. Something like that."

"With me?"

"Yes. Who else?"

"Seriously?"

"Why not?"

Slightly perplexed, István hollers at Jacob to slow down.

Jacob turns and waits for him.

"Okay," István says.

Roddy tells him that he's already spoken to some PR people.

"I think all that will help," he ends by saying.

"Sure," István agrees.

"The most important thing, though," Roddy emphasizes, "is the money."

"Yes."

"We need to see that soon."

"Yes."

"People are starting to lose faith."

"I understand."

Pocketing his phone, István sits down on one of the curvaceous dark green benches that line the allée. Only Jacob's presence prevents him from lighting a cigarette.

That evening he and Helen have dinner at 34 Mayfair and he tells her what Roddy said about the money.

"We need it," he tells her. "We need it now."

She says she'll talk to Heath again.

Heath is the lawyer who oversees the Nyman trust fund.

Helen has been talking to him about the possibility of the fund making another loan to István, to finance the Rainham project.

Heath has to decide if this new "investment" is in line with the terms of the trust. István assumed that that was a formality. In the past Heath has always signed off on loans for István's other projects, all of which were financed in that way, with soft loans from the Nyman fund.

The loan they're asking for now is very much larger than any of the previous ones however.

"Is he being difficult?" István asks, sawing agitatedly at his steak. He's having the A5 Wagyu with matchstick potatoes.

Helen has the char-grilled sea bass with nori butter, brown shrimp, and herbs. "Slightly," she admits.

"What's he saying?"

"He seems worried about how it will look."

"How it will look?"

"Yes."

"What does that mean?"

"Well, it's a lot of money," she says.

"So will he do it?" István asks.

"Honestly?" Helen says. "I'm not sure."

István stares at her for a second. It hadn't occurred to him until now that Heath might actually say no. "Does he want something?" he asks. In the past Heath has been offered various inducements, financial and otherwise.

"I think he wants *not* to be struck off," Helen says. "He's worried, and I understand why."

"You understand why?"

"Yes."

"So whose side are you on?"

"I want this to work out," she says.

"Why's he worried about how it will look *now*?" István asks. "Why wasn't he worried about that before?"

"When the amounts were small it didn't matter so much. Now we're asking for a lot. I'll talk to him again."

"Whatever he wants," István says, "agree to it."

She laughs at that.

"You know what I mean," he says. "This is important."

"I know," she says.

"This is for us, and for Jacob."

"I know," she says.

When they arrive home she asks him if he wants to sleep in her room and he says yes, hoping that sex might make him feel less stressed out about it all.

For a while it does.

The idea that having separate rooms would mean the end of all that has proved entirely wrong. The sex, since then, has had an intensity that it hadn't had for years.

He falls asleep with all the stuff about the minister and the loan and the other investors far from his thoughts.

When he wakes later though, it's all there again.

Helen is snoring. Trying not to disturb her he slips out of her bed and pulls on his dressing gown.

He walks down the hall.

It's already starting to get light. A faint gray is appearing at the windows.

In his own room he opens one and smokes a cigarette, leaning out. The window overlooks the garden, which is vast for London—maybe fifty meters long and twenty wide. It's light enough now to see to the end of it, and quiet enough to hear a solitary bird moving in the leaf litter somewhere.

He shuts the window and pulls the curtains.

Knowing that he won't be able to sleep again without one, he steps into his bathroom and takes a Xanax, and then lies down on his bed.

Helen has her meeting with Heath and somehow persuades him to sign off on the new loan. When she tells István he laughs with satisfaction.

"There is one thing though," she says.

"What?"

"He said he'll have to tell Thomas."

István takes a moment to absorb that. He's on the terrace at the office. The city looks totally gray today—there's just this grayness out there, this miserable grayness, this midafternoon gloom. They're talking on the phone. "Why?" he asks.

"He said he should have told him when he turned eighteen."

"Told him what?"

"Told him everything."

"Everything?"

"Yes."

"Everything about the loans?"

"Yes."

"Why didn't he?"

"I persuaded him not to. Now he's saying he has to. He won't agree to sign off on this one otherwise."

Still trying to work out what this might mean, István says, "Thomas doesn't need to *agree* to it?"

"No," she says.

"He can't stop it?"

"No."

"You're the trustee."

"Yes."

"So it doesn't actually make any difference if he knows?"

"No," she says. "Not exactly. Not practically."

She says that she wants to tell Thomas about it herself, and arranges to have lunch with him in Oxford on Saturday to do that.

Thomas is in his second year at Oxford, doing History of Art at Magdalen. He works moderately hard. He smokes too much weed. And a few times a week he volunteers to help out at a homeless shelter in Iffley.

One evening when he arrives there's a strange atmosphere.

There are quite a few people standing in the entrance hall, in silence, looking up the stairs.

Lucy is one of them. She's another student who volunteers.

Thomas asks her what's happening.

"Steve died," she says, sort of hugging her skateboard.

"What?"

She nods.

"Steve?" Thomas says.

"That's what they said."

"Fuck."

Steve was in his forties.

"How did he die?" Thomas asks.

"Don't know," Lucy says.

The ambulance men are bringing something down the stairs—a stretcher with a dark gray blanket over the person on it, even their face.

The people in the hall watch in silence.

There's just the sound of the ambulance men's bulky green work clothes rustling as they move.

The manager of the shelter is with them, and also someone else who might be a doctor.

Everyone watches as the men carry the stretcher out through the hall.

Thomas, just because he's standing nearest to it, helps with the door, holding it open for them.

"Thanks," one of the ambulance men says to him.

"That's okay," Thomas says.

After that the evening passes off more or less as normal, except that at first there's an unusually hushed atmosphere.

Of course there's a lot of talk about Steve and what he was like, and what people knew about him.

Very little, it seems.

There was nothing very special or memorable about him.

People speculate about how he died.

Nobody seems to know for sure.

They ask the manager of the shelter and she says she isn't supposed to tell them.

"Was it suicide?" someone wants to know.

"I'm sorry," she says.

"Do *you* think he killed himself?" Lucy asks Thomas.

"I don't know," he says.

When they're leaving she asks him if he wants to get a drink. "After what happened," she says, "maybe we need one."

They go to the Bricklayers Arms.

Although it's not a very nice pub it's nearby, at the end of the street. People look at them when they walk in. They're obviously students, and it's not the sort of place where students normally go. Thomas feels slightly intimidated. He's pleased that Lucy is there with him.

She asks him what he wants.

"Just a pint," Thomas says.

She has a pint as well.

"Have you ever seen a dead body before?" she asks.

"Yes," Thomas says.

"When?"

"When my father died."

"Oh yeah," she says. She already knows that his father is dead. "I'm sorry," she says.

"It's all right," Thomas says.

"I've never seen a dead body," she says.

She has dyed hair, a nose stud, a round badge with FCK NZS on it pinned to the lapel of her jacket.

Her definition of NZS sometimes seems to include everyone who isn't actually a Marxist. Thomas has never told her much about his family.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" she says.

"Sorry," he says, lowering his eyes.

"I have a boyfriend," she says.

"Yeah, I know," he says.

"So don't look at me like that."
"Sorry."
"I like you," she says.
He shrugs, embarrassed.
"You're sweet."
Outside on the pavement, next to some rough wooden tables, they part.
"See you on Wednesday," she says.
"Yeah," he says.
And then she's off on her skateboard, shoving herself along with her foot.
It takes him half an hour to walk back to Merton Street.
Normally he would take a taxi but today he walks.
The others aren't in.
Upstairs in his room he lifts a small wooden box down from a shelf that otherwise mostly holds expensive-looking art books. He knows he should smoke less weed. He never seems to arrive home these days without taking the fragrant little box down from the shelf, even in the middle of the afternoon. Even in the morning sometimes.

His mother phones.
She says she wants to talk to him and suggests that they have lunch at the Randolph on Saturday.
"What do you want to talk about?" he asks her.
"I'll tell you on Saturday."
"Is it important?"
"Not very," she says.
"Tell me now," he says.
"No," she says. "On Saturday."

When he arrives at the Randolph she's already there.
He sees her sitting in the lounge looking at something on her phone, and he remembers how it was here that she told him that she and István were going to get married.
He was still at school at the time.
When she told him, he didn't know what to say.
"Why?" he asked, as if that was the most obvious question.
"We're in love," she said.
He thinks he might have laughed at that point, out of shock and embarrassment.
"Why do you laugh?" his mother asked him.
"I don't know," he said.
"Is it funny?"
"No."
"I know it must come as a surprise to you."
He didn't say anything.
"Are you upset?" she asked.
"No," he said. "Why would I be?"
The maitre d' asks him if he wants a table and he points to his mother on the far side of the room.
She smiles when she sees him.
"Hi, darling," she says.
There's an embrace, the smell of her perfume.
"How are you?" she asks.
"I'm okay," he says.
"Should we go in?" she suggests.
They're taken to their table.
He thinks it might actually be the same one they sat at the day she told him that she and István were going to get married. He tries to put that out of his mind. "How are you?" he asks her.
"I'm fine," she says, smiling at him. "I'm well."
"Okay."
She asks him about his studies.
He tells her that at the moment they're doing court art in early modern Europe.
"That sounds interesting," she says.
"It's okay."
"Tell me about it."
He says that, for instance, they're looking at the way political and economic elites used art as a means of justifying and legitimizing

their authority.

"That's very interesting," she says.

"It's okay," he says again.

"And are you still doing the volunteer work?"

"Yes."

"I think it's so wonderful that you do that," she says.

He shrugs.

"It makes me very proud, I have to say."

"That's not why I do it."

"I know it isn't. Of course not."

She reaches across the table and puts her hand over his. She withdraws it a moment later when the waiter arrives and asks them if they're ready to order.

They say they need another minute and turn their attention to the menu.

When the waiter appears again Helen asks for the grilled chicken with chanterelles and *vin jaune* while Thomas opts for the artichoke tagliatelle. The waiter inquires about drinks. Helen says she'll have a glass of white.

The waiter turns to Thomas. "And for you, sir?"

"Just a Coke Zero."

The waiter nods.

"Thanks," Thomas says. "So what did you want to talk to me about?" he asks.

His mother looks nervous, he thinks.

He hopes that she's going to tell him that she and István are getting divorced.

There would be a nice symmetry to that, with them sitting at this table next to the window with an oblique view, through the gray veil of the lace curtains, of Magdalen Street and the Martyrs' monument.

It's not that though.

"It's to do with the family trust," she says, sort of pulling at the edge of the tablecloth.

"What about it?"

"There's something I need to tell you about it."

"Yes?"

She tells him that the trust has, over the past few years, made a series of loans to István, effectively, and that all of the various property developments that István has done in that time have been financed by those loans.

Thomas is obviously shocked. "What do you mean?" he says. "How much are you talking about?"

"Not that much."

"How much?"

"Until this year, about... about eighty million pounds," she says.

"Eighty?"

"Yes."

"That's not that much?"

"Not in terms of the size of the fund."

"Why didn't you tell me about this?"

"I don't tell you about every little transaction."

"Every little transaction?"

"These were fairly minor transactions."

At that moment their drinks arrive.

After having a decent swallow of her wine, his mother tells him that Mr. Heath, the lawyer, has passed all the loans as being in line with the terms of the trust.

What she needs to tell him now, she explains, is that there's going to be a new loan.

"A new loan?"

"Yes."

"To him?"

"To István, yes."

"How much? How much?" he says again when she doesn't immediately answer.

Samuel drives her back to London.

"Did you tell him?" István asks her when she arrives at Cheyne Walk.

"Yes, I did," she says.

"And? What did he say?"

"He wasn't happy."

In the kitchen with its marble-topped island and huge window overlooking the garden, István is making tea. He asks her if she wants one. She says she does.

"What do you mean not happy?" he asks, putting out a second mug.

"He wasn't happy," Helen says again.
"Why not?"
"Why do you think? He said he wants to talk to Heath about it."
István pours water from the kettle into the two mugs. "Can he do that?"
"Yes."
"What would be the point though?" István asks.
"I don't know."
"Heath has already signed off on it."
"I know," she says. "I told him that."
"So?"
Outside it's raining steadily, although it's nearly too dark to see that now.
"Does he think he can stop it?" István asks.
"I told him he couldn't."
He lifts the tea bags out of the mugs and asks her if she wants oat milk.
She nods.
"The whole thing wasn't very nice," she says. "He was very angry and upset."
"I'm sorry."
"He said some horrible things. About you too."
"I'm sure. Like what?" István asks after a short silence, wanting to know despite himself.
"He said you exemplify a primitive form of masculinity. He said he was surprised that I ever found that attractive."
"He said that?"
"Yes, he did."
István snorts with a show of derisive amusement. It hurts though. He's surprised how much it hurts.
"What else did he say?" he asks.
"About you?"
"Yes."
"I don't know."
Seeing that she doesn't want to talk about it he leaves it there.

For a while, a few weeks, Thomas doesn't do anything.

That he knows what's happening now and still does nothing about it makes him feel disgusted with himself.

To escape from those feelings, he smokes more weed than ever.

One day, nervously, he phones Heath.

Heath tells him that everything that's happening is perfectly legal.

When Thomas doesn't seem satisfied with that, Heath suggests that he speak to István about it himself.

Thomas says that he intends to.

Weeks pass, however, without him doing so.

His mother wants him at Cheyne Walk for Christmas. Her siblings and nieces and nephews will all be there, she says. She wants him there too.

At first he says no.

He says he's planning to spend Christmas with Mathilde.

It's only later that it occurs to him that Christmas would provide an opportunity for him to talk to István. One of the things he likes about the idea is that Christmas is still a few weeks away, and until then he will have an answer when he asks himself why he isn't doing anything.

He sends his mother a WhatsApp telling her that he will be there after all.

Thank you x, she sends back.

When he returns to London at the end of term he stays at Mathilde's house. She isn't there. He has a key though, and the housekeeper is expecting him.

On Christmas Eve he meets some Oxford friends for lunch in London. Afterward they go to a pub in Knightsbridge with an open fire. It's one of those winter afternoon drinking sessions that merge into evening in a way that's almost imperceptible as it's happening. It's just suddenly nine o'clock. The last thing he remembers is trying to order an Uber on the pavement outside the pub and having to throw up.

He wakes up the next morning with a hangover and makes a spliff to smoke with his coffee.

He's not supposed to smoke in Mathilde's house—particularly not weed—and he smokes it out the window. The lunch at Cheyne Walk isn't until two so he thinks he should be all right.

He has another spliff at twelve, though, and is still slightly feeling it as he sits in the taxi two and a half hours later.

He tells the taxi to stop on the Kings Road and walks the rest of the way.

He feels he needs some fresh air.

He arrives at the house, at the leafless wisteria entwined in the iron railings, and has the usual feeling, the feeling he has had for some years now, of this being his home and not his home at the same time.

Entering the hall he hears that they're still in the drawing room.

The lunch hasn't even started yet.

He wonders whether to slip out again and come back in half an hour.

He's been seen though.

His mother's sister Sarah has seen him from the stairs.

"Hello," she says.

He waves.

"How are you?"

"Yeah, okay."

She's hugging him now.

"Your mum was worried you weren't going to show up."

"Well."

She leads him up the stairs.

Helen meets him on the landing outside the drawing room.

"Here you are," she says.

"Yeah."

"Are you okay?" she asks, sort of frowning.

"Why?"

"You don't look... Are you ill or something?"

"I was out last night," he says.

"You're sure that's all it is?"

"Yes."

In the drawing room there's a massive Christmas tree, presents lying around.

Some servant Thomas doesn't know—she looks like she's from the Philippines or something—is circulating with a champagne bottle.

"Do you have a glass?" she asks him.

"No," he says.

"Should I get you one?" she asks.

"No," he says. "Thank you."

She smiles and moves on.

Not long after that, lunch is served.

In the seating plan, his mother has placed him and István as far apart as possible, at opposite ends of the table.

There's a moment, toward the end of lunch, when he thinks that maybe he won't say anything to István after all. And then he understands that if he doesn't say anything, if he just attends this lunch and doesn't say anything to him, it will have almost the opposite effect of what he wanted to achieve—it will seem to be almost a sort of acceptance on his part of what is happening.

With darkness already falling outside, István quietly withdraws to his study.

He's in there smoking a cigar when there's a timid knock on the door.

"Yeah," he says, thinking that it's probably Helen wanting him to join them downstairs again, or to tell him that some members of her family are leaving.

In fact it's Thomas.

"Thomas," István says, surprised.

Since he arrived at the house two hours ago Thomas has avoided even looking at him, and has hardly said a word to anyone else.

"I need to talk to you," he says now, still half-hidden by the door.

"Sure," István says.

Thomas steps into the room.

He looks terrified.

His lips are stained with wine.

"What is it?" István asks him.

There's a long pause and then Thomas says, "I know what you're doing."

"What am I doing?"

"Stealing from me."

István laughs. He shakes his head. "What are you talking about?"

"You know what I'm talking about."

"I'm not stealing from you."

"Yes, you are."

For a few seconds they stare at each other across the desk. It used to be Thomas's father's desk.

"I don't need to talk to you about this Thomas," István says.

There's another silence, a longer one.

For a moment Thomas looks as if he might be about to say something else.

He doesn't though.

"I think you should leave now," István says quietly, looking down at his cigar.

And then, when Thomas doesn't move from where he is, István looks at him again with an expression that definitely encourages him to get the fuck out of there, which after a few more seconds he does.

Later Jacob asks István why Thomas was so upset.

"I don't know," István says.

"Is he angry with you?" Jacob asks.

"He seems to be," István says.

"Why?"

"I don't know, darling," István says.

"Mummy said—" Jacob stops and looks worried.

"What did she say?"

Jacob shakes his head. "Nothing."

"What did she say?"

Even though he presses him for a few minutes, Jacob won't tell him what Helen said.

István finds Helen and asks her.

"I told him that Tommy has never liked you," she says.

"You told him that?"

"Yes, I did."

"Why?"

"He sees it. It's obvious. I wanted him to know that Tommy has never liked you, that it wasn't actually about anything that you'd done."

She's half-drunk and upset.

It seems there was some sort of scene after Thomas left his study.

"Where is he now?" István asks.

"He's left," she says.

"Yeah?"

She nods.

"Where did he go?"

"I don't know. Mathilde's place?"

"I'm sorry," István says.

"Why are *you* sorry?"

"I know you wanted him to be here."

There's quite a long silence and then she says, "Actually I feel terrible because I don't."

After Christmas they do a fortnight's skiing in Verbier. The snow is disappointingly thin and patchy when they arrive. Then more falls on the second day. The mountains are hidden in gray fog through which the tiny swirling flakes fall. They sting your face as you go down, and accumulate on your goggles, obscuring the view. Jacob complains of that, and also of being cold. He has a private instructor who spends the day with him on the artificial snow of the nursery slopes while István and Helen and Helen's sister Sarah and her husband tackle more difficult trails. István makes an effort and is mostly able to keep up, even though he only started skiing in his mid-thirties, whereas the others all learned to do it on school trips and family vacations when they were Jacob's age.

Jacob himself doesn't seem to be a natural. He keeps falling over, and snow gets into his boots and the sleeves of his suit. On the morning of the third day he even says, after breakfast, that he doesn't want to go out at all, and while the others are getting their stuff together, István sits him down and asks why.

"I just want to stay here," Jacob says.

"And do what?" István asks him.

"I don't know."

"There's nothing to do here."

"There is."

"Like what?"

"Play *Minecraft*."

"We're not here to play *Minecraft*," István tells him. "We're here to ski."

"I don't like skiing."

"Why not? It's fun."

"No it isn't."

They have a chalet that sleeps ten.

As darkness falls outside István and Jacob play Monopoly in front of the fire. Helen and her sister and Mike are already on the wine. Sarah and Mike's kids, teenagers, are looking at their phones somewhere.

The chalet is fully staffed. There's even a professional photographer who pops in to take photos for them to use on Instagram.

There's also an excellent chef. István and Helen have developed a shared interest in food—unlike his interest in tennis, or hers in art, eating well is something that they are able to enjoy together.

About a week after they get back to London, Helen's friend the artist has a private view. It's her first show for some years and apparently a major event on the London art scene. That's what Helen says on the way there anyway. Then she looks at the time on her phone and says, "We're going to be late."

"Is that a problem?" István asks.

"I promised I wouldn't be."

She tells him that even now that she's internationally famous her friend gets very nervous before openings and private views. "I promised I'd be one of the first to arrive," she says.

"Her wife will be there, won't she?" István says. It still feels strange to say that.

"Yes," Helen says. "She will."

"So?"

"She wants me to get there early," Helen says. "I said I would."

"Okay," István says. Forcing it out of its foil sleeve with his thumbnail, he extracts a pellet of chewing gum and transfers it to his mouth. Then he wordlessly offers the pack to Helen, who just shakes her head and turns to the window on her side.

A minute later he says, "Will Thomas be there?"

"I don't know," Helen says. And then, "She will have invited him. I don't know if he'll be there."

She hasn't spoken to Thomas since Christmas.

"Probably not," she says.

For a moment they're in Berkeley Square, and a minute after that they arrive at the Gagosian Grosvenor Hill.

While Helen finds her friend to apologize for being late, István accepts a glass of champagne and has an initial stroll through the place.

For him this is an important evening too. With the agreement of Helen's friend, he has invited some of the potential investors in the Rainham project—it's the sort of prestige event, not open to the public, milling with members of the political and financial elite, that he hopes will impress them.

He hopes, anyway, that his personal connection to an event like this will persuade them that he's someone they can have confidence in.

Spotting an American banker who works for the Canadian pension fund that Roddy is negotiating with, István approaches him.

"Hey," he says, patting the man on the shoulder.

The American is looking at one of the artworks.

"What do you think?" he asks.

"Interesting," István says, after a pause.

"I'm not sure I understand it," the American tells him.

"No," István agrees.

Still looking at the work in front of them the man says, "Did you see her show last year in New York?"

István admits that he didn't. "Was it the same stuff or?"

The man looks around, as if to see what's there. "Sort of," he says. He has a sip of his drink. "How are you?" he asks.

István nods. "Yeah, well," he says. "You?"

The American at first offers only a weary shrug. "You know," he says. "Surviving."

István laughs in friendly solidarity. "Yeah," he says.

"No, I'm fine," the man says. "Good to see you again."

"You too."

They talk some more, mostly avoiding direct discussion of the Rainham project, and then István excuses himself and sets to working the room. As Roddy told him to, he makes an effort to spend a few minutes in small talk with each of the potential investors who have showed up.

Then he looks for Helen.

He finds her with her friend, who does in fact seem very nervous.

"What do you think?" she asks him.

"I like it," István says.

"Honestly?"

"Yes," he says.

They shake their heads at some finger food and then Helen introduces him to someone else who's standing there with them, so far

silently, a much younger woman with a slightly weird haircut. Not very weird. Just slightly weird, as if she cut it herself and tried to make it look normal and just didn't quite succeed.

She turns out to be Danish and her accent sounds almost Australian when she says, in answer to a question of István's about what she does, "I make *aaht*."

"So you're an artist?" he says.

"I don't like to say that," she says.

"Why not?" he asks.

"I just don't," she says.

He asks her if she knows many of the people there.

She shakes her head.

"No?"

"They're not my kind of people," she says.

"Aren't they?"

She shakes her head again.

"What kind of people are they?" he asks her.

"Money people and socialites," she says.

He laughs at that. He's enjoying talking to her.

It's just the two of them now—Helen and her friend have been drawn away into some other loitering knot of people.

"Money people and socialites," he says. "You think so?"

"Yes."

"Maybe."

"Which one are you?" she asks him.

"Me?" István says.

She nods.

"Which do you think?"

"I don't know."

"Maybe I'm not either," he says.

Her eyebrows, which are fashionably untrimmed, do something that indicates skepticism.

"I'm not a socialite anyway." He smiles at her.

"Okay," she says, as if that leaves only one possibility.

There are also some other kinds of people there, he says. For instance, there are some well-known politicians and journalists.

He points some of them out to her and she asks him whether that is in fact the foreign secretary that she sees over there.

István looks. "Yes, it is," he says. "Have you met him?"

"Of course not," she says.

Definitely showing off now, he offers to introduce her.

The foreign secretary probably has only a vague memory of István—they met at a drinks party for donors a few months earlier.

He's very friendly, though, when István approaches him and introduces the young artist.

The foreign secretary's wife—who's not much older than the artist—is with him and the four of them talk about Helen's friend's work.

"I think there's something interestingly interactive about it," the foreign secretary's wife says.

"How d'you mean?" István asks her.

"I think it sort of invites the viewer to investigate it," she says. "To find their own meaning in it."

While she's saying that, there's some sort of disturbance near the entrance, a disturbance involving the security staff, and for a moment they all look in that direction. It's hard to see what's happening at first but when he does, István experiences a small shock of irritation. The disturbance involves Thomas, who it seems is making an appearance after all.

Still taking that in, István is only half-aware that the foreign secretary's wife is saying something to him.

"Sorry?" he says to her.

She asks him again what he thinks of the work.

"Uh," he says. "I like it."

She waits for him to say something more.

Her husband and the young artist are waiting too.

It's hard for István to formulate his thoughts though, as he hears Thomas shouting, "I *do* have an invitation. I just don't have it with me."

"Someone's had too much to drink," the foreign secretary says, with a smile.

"Yeah," István agrees, trying to smile as well.

He hears Helen's voice now as she intervenes to smooth things over with the security staff. She sounds tense and upset.

The foreign secretary's wife is still talking about the work.

She's about to say something else when Thomas screams, "Don't touch me!"

He screams it so loudly that everyone turns to look.

Helen had apparently tried to take him by the arm.

"Don't touch me," he says again.

“What do you want?” Helen asks him.

“I want to talk to you,” he says.

“Let’s go and talk, then,” she says, indicating the door.

“No,” Thomas says, obviously drunk and very upset. “I want to talk to you here.”

“Here?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“I want them to hear.”

“To hear what?”

“How you’ve been stealing from me.”

Helen laughs. “What?”

The feeling of something like foreboding that István had when he first saw that Thomas was there is suddenly much worse.

Thomas’s voice trembles slightly as he says, “Yes. You’ve been stealing from me. You, and *him*.”

He points, and István is aware of the people he is with, the foreign secretary and his wife and the young artist, and in fact everyone else in the place, taking a new sort of interest in him.

He is not *that* aware of it though.

He is not that aware of anyone else at all as he stares at Thomas, who is now saying to his mother, “Should I tell them? Should I tell them what you’ve been doing?”

“You’re drunk,” Helen says.

“I know,” Thomas says.

“I think you should leave,” she says.

“I don’t want to leave.”

“I think you—”

“No!” Thomas screams, with such violence that she visibly flinches.

A moment later there are tears shining in her eyes.

“I know you want me to leave,” he shouts at her. “I know you wish I wasn’t here.”

Someone, a middle-aged man in a dark suit, approaches Thomas and whispers something to him and seems to try to take him aside. Without even looking at him, Thomas shakes the man off. Still speaking to his mother he says, “You’ve made that very obvious. You’ve made it very obvious that you wish I wasn’t here.”

István watches him say that with a strange feeling of detachment, a feeling that only deepens as Thomas starts to tell everyone there that István and Helen have been stealing from him for years, that all of István’s apparent successes were only thanks to that stolen money, and that in the end the two of them are nothing more than thieves.

They have something to eat at a café near the police station. Or at least István does, still in his stale Tom Ford suit from the night before, his own odors starting to overpower the lingering scent of the Cartier perfume that he uses these days.

"I'm sorry," he says.

Roddy doesn't say anything.

It's eight o'clock in the morning and they're facing each other across a Formica table.

The café they're in seems to be a survivor from an earlier age. It feels like nothing has changed in there since about 1983, including the food. The plate that's put in front of István a few minutes later has on it two fried eggs, two grayish sausages, two triangular hash browns, two slices of toast, also triangular, and a small puddle of slightly congealed baked beans.

Roddy isn't eating. He just sits there holding his coffee, which is still too hot for him to drink, and looking out through the glass front of the place at the pale gray side of St. Martin-in-the-Fields, which is across the street from where they're sitting.

"What happened?" he finally asks.

István finishes spreading butter onto his toast.

He struggles to explain what happened.

He tries though.

He feels that he owes Roddy some kind of explanation, or at least an honest attempt at an explanation, having phoned him at six in the morning and summoned him to Charing Cross Police Station.

The paperwork and other formalities took over an hour and then they walked out into the cold January dawn and István said he was hungry.

"I know a place," Roddy despondently told him.

"All right," István said, lighting a cigarette.

"Just over there," Roddy said.

István nodded, hugging himself in his thin suit.

They walked in silence along the Strand.

Some Romanian builders and a sad-looking middle-aged man in a leather jacket who might even be asleep are the only other customers in the café.

Roddy himself has a tousled, unshaven appearance, having had to dress and leave his house in a hurry. To see him like that makes him look somehow unfamiliar, almost like a stranger.

He listens while István tries to explain what happened. The way he describes it, he was subjected to intolerable provocation. That's what he stresses. The provocation.

"He said we were stealing from him—that just isn't true."

"Why didn't you just ignore it, then?" Roddy asks.

"I don't know," István says. It's something that he asked himself many times during the long, sleepless night that he spent in the police station. "It would have looked like I accepted what he was saying. And some of the things he said after that."

"Like what?"

"Like... I don't want to... He said some horrible things."

Roddy waits for him to tell him what Thomas said.

István finds himself unable to do that.

The words, when he opens his mouth to say them, seem too painful and humiliating to say out loud.

Even so, his own actions are hard for him to understand.

The violence with which he threw himself on Thomas and knocked him to the floor.

He finds it hard to believe that he did that now.

Roddy is still waiting for him to say something.

Instead he just sits there with tears in his eyes.

Perhaps embarrassed, Roddy looks away again, and after wiping his eyes on a paper napkin, István finishes his breakfast.

It takes a few minutes and then he asks the other question that's been on his mind all night. "Is it possible to keep this quiet?"

"It happened in a room full of journalists," Roddy says. "It's already all over the internet."

István's face is expressionless as he takes that in.

There's another long silence.

"So where does this leave us?" he asks.

Roddy sighs. "Honestly?" he says. "I think we're finished."

They share a taxi as far as Cheyne Walk and then Roddy takes it on to Fulham, or wherever it is that he lives.

István lets himself into the house.

There's no sign of Helen.

His mother tells him that she hasn't seen her since yesterday.

"She hasn't been home?" he asks.

"I don't think so."

He tells her what happened at the Gagosian gallery, and that he spent the night in a police station.

Then he takes a Xanax and sleeps until the middle of the afternoon.

There's still no sign of Helen.

While he's in the shower, though, a message arrives from her friend the artist saying that she's with her. That's all the message says. *Helen is with me.*

He doesn't answer it. He gets dressed and leaves the house and walks across the Albert Bridge.

After about ten minutes he arrives at Jacob's school, where some other parents are already standing outside.

He joins them and waits for his son to appear.

8

HE STILL DOESN'T QUITE have the hang of this.

The link in the email opens another window.

He needs to put in his password and then he's offered "Join Meeting."

A few moments later someone is there.

István apologizes for being late.

"No problem," the man on the screen says. And then, "Do you want to turn your camera on?"

"Oh." István looks for how to do that.

"That's it," the man says.

The main picture on the screen is the man, sitting there with some bookshelves behind him.

A smaller picture shows István himself, slightly silhouetted against the unrealistic brightness of a window.

"How are you?" the man asks.

"Yeah, okay," István tells him. "I'm okay."

"Do you want to talk about how you're feeling?" the man suggests.

"Uh." István looks down at his hands and then at the screen again and says, "Sure."

There's another silence and then István says, "Well, I'm feeling okay." He has a quick suck on the vape he's holding. "You know."

"Sure."

"Nothing special."

"Okay," the man on the screen says.

The man on the screen is Rafe.

He's a therapist.

They've been doing this for about six months now.

It was part of the plea bargain deal. A straight guilty plea to common assault in exchange for a very large fine and a commitment to "seek treatment."

Since last autumn "seeking treatment" has involved seeing Rafe once a week.

During the first sessions they talked mainly about Thomas, about what happened at the Gagosian gallery that night, and István's feelings about it all.

Since then they have talked about other things as well. About István's life more widely, about experiences from his past.

Every few weeks though, Rafe wants to talk about Thomas again.

He asks questions that are obviously designed to probe István's feelings about Thomas.

István answers such questions warily.

"I don't know," he says.

Rafe wants more.

He doesn't say anything.

He just waits.

"I don't know," István says again. "I suppose I feel..."

He feels hatred.

That's what he feels.

He feels hatred that the passage of more than a year doesn't seem to have diminished much. If anything, the opposite. He hates Thomas more now than he did a year ago. He holds him directly responsible for all the legal, social, and financial disasters that have afflicted his life since that night at the Gagosian.

There are moments when he definitely wishes he was dead.

He hasn't seen him since that night.

Helen hasn't seen him either.

He still won't speak to her.

He and Rafe talk about that too sometimes, about the fact that Thomas won't speak to Helen.

István says, "I mean, I know it's painful for her."

"How do *you* feel about it though?" Rafe asks.

István doesn't answer that for a few seconds. And then he says, "About what exactly?"

Rafe is as patient as ever. "About the situation with Thomas."

"You mean that he isn't talking to her?"

"Well, that's part of it."

"I thought we were talking about that," István says.

"We are," Rafe confirms.

"So you want to know what I feel about that?"

"Okay."

"Honestly I'm not sure," István says, after another substantial silence, during which he once again lifts the vape to his mouth. "If I'm honest, in a way it's easier for me that he's not involved in our lives."

"How do you mean easier?" Rafe wants to know.

"I mean... He was always a sort of disruptive influence in our lives."

"Disruptive?"

"Emotionally."

"Okay."

"You see what I mean?"

Rafe nods.

"So yes, in a way it's easier like this. You asked me how *I* felt," István says.

"Yes."

"I know it's painful for Helen though," he says.

"Sure."

"So in a way I feel that too. Or it *affects* me."

"Yes."

They talk about it some more and then their time is up.

"End Meeting."

István shuts the laptop.

There's the distinctive quiet that follows the end of one of these things, the restoration of a solitude that was anyway only partly dispelled by the presence of someone else on the laptop screen.

He has a pull on the vape and then, wondering what to do, opens the French window and steps onto the stone paving outside.

He squints in the spring daylight.

It's Wednesday afternoon.

They leave the Old Stable Yard and turn onto the dirt track that runs along the edge of the estate. The track runs very straight for nearly half a mile, with open fields on one side and trees on the other. István feels Jacob's arms tighten around him as he pushes the quad bike toward its top speed. It jumps off humps in the track and smashes through shallow puddles with a sound that immediately seems far behind them. The engine sustains a single high-pitched note and the air feels hard and sharp on his face. What he likes about it is the way that the exhilaration and jeopardy of the speed fix him in the moment so that nothing else seems to exist.

It feels like a sort of freedom, a sort of escape.

It doesn't last long.

Approaching the end of the straight section he has to slow down dramatically to turn.

"Okay?" he shouts over his shoulder.

He feels Jacob nod.

He's still holding tight to him.

István enjoys the tightness of his arms around him, the feeling that they're experiencing these moments of wordless purity together.

There's another straight section toward the lake and they accumulate speed again.

"Hold on!" he shouts.

The engine howls.

At first they're under trees.

In a sort of green tunnel.

And then suddenly the sky is above them, and the lake is there on their left.

And then it isn't.

They're under trees again, speeding on in the cool green light until they arrive at the place where the surface of the track deteriorates and he has to slow down. There are some potholes here and he picks his way among them. The holes are full of water the same whitish color as the path and are sometimes difficult to spot. When he misses one there's a splashing sound and the quad lurches and tilts.

And then he sees a fallen branch across their path and has to stop. He's not surprised to see it. There was a storm overnight. Lying in bed, he heard the rain against the window and what seemed to be thunder, although he wasn't sure about that at first.

He puts the quad into neutral and dismounts.

Walking feels strange and slow for a second or two. It feels strangely slow. It feels like those dreams where you move too slowly to prevent some looming disaster.

He stoops and takes hold of the wet black branch. It fell from a chestnut tree and still has a couple of immature flowers on it. They look much tougher, much more sinewy and businesslike, up close than they do high on the tree. He discards the branch into the weeds at the side of the path and walks back to the vibrating machine.

In helmet and eye shield, a whole plastic suit of armor, Jacob watches him. "Okay?" he asks.

István nods, wiping some slimy dirt from his hands.

He remounts and they pick up speed again until they arrive at the farmer's field, where they turn left onto a muddy track marked with the imprints of tractor tires. As they move slowly along it, Jacob loosens his hold on his father's torso and looks across the field. The approaching sound of the quad startles a flock of starlings out of the young wheat. They move, in unison, into the trees.

Jacob is pointing at them.

István, half aware of them in his peripheral vision, nods.

He doesn't hear what Jacob is saying about them.

"Yeah," he says as they turn onto the path that will take them back toward the house, accelerating through sparse woods and then parkland and then the more formal gardens.

When the house comes into view, he eases off the throttle.

He stops at the foot of the south front steps and kills the engine.

Sudden quiet.

And in the quiet the sad sound of a plane, somewhere above the clouds, descending toward Luton Airport. You don't hear that much nowadays, which makes it more noticeable when it does happen.

He looks up.

There's nothing to see.

Just bright clouds, and the sound of the plane somewhere inside them.

"Want to have a go?" he asks Jacob.

He means at driving the quad. It's something he's offered before. To his disappointment, Jacob has always sort of shied away from it.

"Have a go," István says. "Don't you want to?"

"All right," Jacob says, though without much enthusiasm.

"Come on," István says. "It's fun."

They switch positions so that Jacob is in front holding the handlebars and István is sitting behind him.

He explains how it works. It's the 300 cc automatic Polaris, the smaller one. There's also a more powerful manual Yamaha that István sometimes uses on his own—Helen won't let him take Jacob on that one. She says it's too dangerous.

Following his father's instructions Jacob turns the key and then presses the start button.

"Okay," István says. "Now pull the clutch handle."

"Which one is that?"

"I showed you."

"This one?"

"Yes."

Jacob's left hand tentatively squeezes it.

"Harder," István says. "Don't worry. Nothing will happen."

Jacob squeezes it harder and the sound of the engine subtly alters.

"That's it," István says. "Now we need to put it into Low."

"Okay."

István indicates the gear shifter. It has five positions—Park, Reverse, Neutral, Low, and High.

Jacob takes hold of it and pulls it into the Low position.

"Okay," István says. "Now release the clutch."

When Jacob does that the quad immediately starts to move forward and István feels his son tense up.

"It's okay," he says, with a kind laugh.

"Okay."

"You're doing fine," István tells him.

"Okay," Jacob says again.

For a while they move along at little more than walking pace.

Then István says, "Give it some throttle. Just a bit."

Jacob twists the throttle.

For a moment the engine snarls and the quad jerks forward. Then it slows again.

"That's it. Bit more," István says.

Jacob tries the throttle again, and more firmly this time, so that the quad sustains a slight increase in speed.

"That's good," István says, raising his voice above the louder engine noise. "Keep it straight."

They're still only doing about ten miles an hour.

"You remember what I told you about braking?" István asks.

"Yes," Jacob says.

"What did I tell you?"

"Always start with the back wheels?"

"That's right. Okay," István says. "Try it now."

It suddenly feels as if the quad is pulling a heavy trailer.

"Now add the front wheels," István says.

Jacob is slightly too sharp with the front wheels and they both pitch forward on the seat as the bike stops.

"Okay," István says. "That was fine."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. Sure. You did fine."

Jacob seems to have had enough though, and when István encourages him to have another go the next day he says he doesn't want to.

István tells Helen about it.

She says, "If he's not into it, he's not into it."

"Why isn't he into it?"

"I don't know. He just isn't."

"He should be."

She laughs. "Why?" she says.

She seems depressed.

Always a more sociable person than him, she's feeling the solitude and isolation of lockdown more than he is, he thinks.

She spends a lot of time "meeting" friends via Skype or Zoom or whatever. Sometimes they even do "parties"—each of them physically alone with their own personal bottle of wine, and the others on their laptop screens.

He doesn't do anything like that himself.

Every few days he and Jacob video-call his mother through Messenger. She was in Budapest when the lockdown started and now she's stuck there.

"How are you?" she asks Jacob.

"I'm okay," he says.

"What have you been doing?" she asks.

"I don't know," he says vaguely.

"You must know," she says.

He sighs and says, "Just hanging out."

"What did you do today?" she asks.

"Today?"

"Yes."

He has to think about it.

As usual he leaves before the end of the call and István and his mother finish up on their own.

"How are you?" she asks him.

"Yeah, okay," he says.

"Helen?"

"She's okay."

They talk about Jacob.

"Is he okay?" István's mother asks.

"Yes," István says.

"He isn't lonely?"

"I hope not."

September.

The school time.

Summer's end.

The leaves start to fall. First from the chestnuts and then from the planes.

They accumulate on the asphalt paths of Battersea Park.

They accumulate at Ayot St. Peter too, on the paths and lawns and on the tennis court. Mr. Szymanski uses the blower to clear them from the court.

István hears the sound of that as he shaves on Tuesday morning.

Even though the lockdown is over, he doesn't have much work to do these days. He hardly ever visits the office in Battersea. He's sort of lost interest in all of that. Since the failure of the Rainham project, and with everything locked down for much of the year, there isn't a lot happening anyway. So that autumn he spends part of the time in London and part of it at Ayot St. Peter. Helen stays mostly in London during the week while Jacob is at school. One morning, on a day when István happens to be there, they're having breakfast in the kitchen when the nanny appears and tells them that Jacob says he isn't feeling well.

"What's the matter?" Helen asks her.

"He says he's not feeling well."

"What does that mean?"

"I'm not sure," the nanny says.

She obviously wants Helen to deal with the situation herself, and understanding that, Helen stands up and the two women leave.

István makes himself another coffee at the Marzocco machine.

Then he sits and looks at things on his phone until Helen reappears ten minutes later.

"Is he okay?" he asks her.

"He'll stay at home today," she says.

"Yeah?"

She nods.
"Why? Does he have a fever?"
"I don't think so."
"So what's the problem?" he asks.
"He's just not feeling a hundred percent," Helen says.
"He's not feeling a hundred percent?"
"No."
"What does that mean?"
She doesn't answer.
She's on her phone now, talking to Samuel the driver. "Hello Sam?" she says. "Jacob's staying home today."
She's still talking to him when István walks up to the fourth floor.
Jacob isn't asleep or anything.
He's sitting up in bed with a book. Some illustrated history of seafaring or something. He's always looking at that book these days.
"Hey," István says.
Perhaps with an effort to make his voice sound weak Jacob says, "Hi."
"You not feeling okay?" István asks him.
Jacob just shakes his head.
"What's up?"
Jacob shrugs.
"You feel sick or what?"
"No, I don't feel sick."
István places a hand on his son's forehead. It feels maybe slightly warm, though not dramatically so.
"So what is it?" he asks.
"I just don't feel okay," Jacob says.
"You feel okay enough to read," István points out.
Jacob lets the book fall out of his hands. "Not really."
"No?"
He shakes his head.
"If you don't feel well then you should sleep," István tells him.
"Okay."
After kissing him on the forehead, István turns off the light and leaves.

"He seems okay," he says to Helen.
She's in the bath.
He's perched on the edge of the freestanding tub.
They're in a phase of sleeping separately and he hasn't seen her naked like this for a month or two.
He tapped on the door and asked if he could come in and she said yes. "I think he should go to school," he says.
"He doesn't want to," Helen says.
"I know he doesn't *want* to."
"I told him he could stay at home today."
"Why?"
She sighs.
"What is it?" he asks, suddenly aware that there *is* some particular thing.
She says, "There's this kid at the school."
"Yes."
"He's not very nice to Jacob."
"What do you mean 'not very nice'?"
"I don't know exactly what happens," she says. "Jacob's frightened of him."
"He's *frightened* of him?"
"Yes."
"Who is this kid?"
"His name's Toby."
"Do the teachers know about this?"
"I've spoken to Jacob's form teacher."
"And?"
"And she offered to talk to Toby about it."
"Well?" István says.
"I said maybe she shouldn't do that just yet."
"Why?"
"I would prefer it if Jacob was able to sort this out on his own, without the teacher having to intervene."

István stands up and turns to the window.
"I'm just not sure it will help in the long term to have the teacher talk to Toby," Helen says.
"Who the fuck is this Toby?" István asks, still looking out the window.
"Just some kid."
"Do you know him?"
"I know him by sight," Helen says.
"What does he look like?"
"I don't know. He looks normal."
"Do you know his parents."
"I see his mother sometimes."
"What's she like?"
"I don't know. What difference does it make?"
István doesn't say anything for a while.
He's aware that there's nothing he can actually do.
It's true what Helen says—in a situation like this only Jacob himself can take any action without making things worse.
The trouble is that the action Jacob *has* taken is to pretend to be ill so that he can stay at home.
Helen says, "If it doesn't improve I'll talk to the teacher about it again and get her to talk to Toby or to his parents."
István is still standing at the window, looking out.
"Okay," he says.

The next day he takes Jacob to school himself. They walk across the bridge and through the streets on the other side, Jacob wearing his Star Wars backpack while István carries the second bag, the one with his sports kit in it.

The school is red brick, and vaguely mock-Gothic. A neatly clipped hedge separates it from the street.

At the entrance István says, "Okay, have a good day." He makes an effort to sound normal and upbeat. As they stand on the sidewalk in front of the entrance, though, he's unable to help looking at Jacob worriedly as he tries to get a sense of what he's feeling, and Jacob probably picks up on that. His face seems unusually neutral, as if he doesn't want to give anything away.

István leans down and kisses his hair.

"See you," he says.

Jacob puts a hand on his father's arm for a moment and then walks in.

"Hey!" István shouts. "Your sports stuff."

With his face twisted into a sort of smile now, Jacob hurries back for the cloth drawstring with his sports kit in it—his sneakers and shorts and the T-shirt with the school's logo on it, the same one that's on his jacket front.

István holds it out for him. "There."

"Thanks."

"Have a good day," István says again, as if just saying it might make it more likely to happen, and then watches Jacob through the pointed arch of the entrance until he's out of sight.

He turns and walks away.

He walks through quiet streets toward the river.

The idea that his son is afraid of something, that he's suffering in some way, and that there's not much he can do about it is very hard for him to deal with.

It's just very painful to think about.

He wondered, yesterday, whether to speak to him about the situation.

He decided not to.

It wasn't just that Helen had said that Jacob didn't want him to know about it.

He thought as well that talking about it might just make it seem more significant.

Maybe, he thinks, it's not actually that significant.

He wants to think that it's not that significant.

He hopes, anyway, that the situation will just go away.

At half term, Helen takes Jacob to Venice. She says she wants to show it to him.

"Isn't he too young for that?" István asks her.

"Too young?"

"I mean to enjoy something like that."

"I don't think so," she says. And then, "Something like what?"

"Sightseeing or whatever."

"I don't think so," she says. "I think he'll enjoy it."

"Okay."

They're there for five days, staying at the Gritti Palace.

"Did you like it?" István asks Jacob when they get back.

"It was okay," Jacob says.
"You weren't bored?"
"Sometimes," Jacob admits.
"What did you do?"
"Looked at things."
"What things?"
"I don't know. Pictures."
"Tell me about it," István says.
From what Jacob says István imagines him setting out from the hotel every morning and dutifully following Helen around.
"What did you like most?" he asks him.
The watery aspect of the place, it seems. The way that all aspects of life there involved waterborne transport. He tells István about an incident where two paramedics brought a person on a stretcher out of a building and loaded them into a kind of water ambulance, which then sped off under the bridges with a siren and everything.
The way he tells the story it's obvious that he enjoyed watching that.
István smiles at him.
He tells him that he liked seeing that sort of thing when he first went there too.
"When did you first go there?" Jacob asks.
"Not that long ago," István says. "About ten years ago."
Jacob widens his eyes. "Ten years *isn't that long*?" he says.
"No," István says, smiling at him, "it isn't."
"Did you go with Mummy?"
"Yes."
There's a silence and then Jacob says, "We had pasta with squid ink."
István laughs at the unexpectedness of it. "Yeah?"
Jacob nods.
"Was it good?"
"It was okay," Jacob says.
"So," István says, "back to school tomorrow."
"Yeah," Jacob says.
He seems okay.
The idea doesn't seem to distress him anyway, and István takes heart from that.
Then one evening a few weeks later Helen says to him, "I need to talk to you. About Jacob."
"What is it?" István asks, pouring himself some whisky.
"He wants to change school," Helen says.
"What?"
She says again, "He wants to change school."
"Change *school*?"
"Yes."
"Why?"
"He isn't happy where he is."
"What do you mean not happy?"
"You know what I mean."
"That's still going on?"
"Of course it is."
"Why of course?"
"It's still a problem," Helen says, sort of taking his point.
"That Toby kid?"
"Yes. I have tried speaking to his mother."
"And?"
"She said that her son would never do something like that. I said unfortunately that wasn't true. She sort of lost it when I said that."
While she talks about a second unsuccessful attempt to engage with Toby's mother István stares at his own fist, held directly in front of his mouth.
It might look, from the outside, as if he is thinking about something.
In fact he isn't thinking.
There's a kind of emptiness inside his mind.
"It should be this Toby," he says finally, "who should change school."
"That's not going to happen," Helen says.
"Why not?"
"It just isn't."
"I don't want Jacob to change school."
When he says that, Helen sighs. "I knew you'd have this attitude," she says.

He looks at her. She seems almost angry. “What attitude?”
“That you’d try to stand in the way of it.”
“You think he should change school?”
“Yes, I do,” she says. “Why not? If he’s not happy there.”
“Why not?” István asks, in a tone of disbelief.
“Yes,” she says.
“Why not? It’s like… surrendering to them.”
Helen makes a sort of hissing sound.
“Isn’t it?” he wants to know.
“What do you even mean by that?”
“By what?”
“Surrendering.”
Instead of answering the question István says, “And what if the same thing happens at his new school?”
“It won’t.”
“You don’t know that. What if it does?”
“We’ll deal with it then.”
“I don’t want him to change school.”
“You want him to be miserable?”
“Fuck you,” he says.
“Seriously?”
“You know I don’t.”
“I don’t understand what your problem is,” she says.
“My problem is that I don’t want him to be driven out of the school where he is now.”
“Please don’t shout at me,” Helen says. And then, “That’s not what this would be.”
“Of course that’s what this would be.”
“I think that’s a strange way of looking at it.”
“Why?”
“I just do.”
“That’s what this would be,” he says.
He tries to explain to her what he thinks, which is that if Jacob leaves the school now, under these circumstances, he will always have to live with the fact that that happened. “Do you think that will be positive for his self-esteem?”
“I don’t think it will be positive for his self-esteem to stay where he is,” she says.
“Not if he doesn’t do something about it.”
“Like what? Tough it out?” she sarcastically asks, when he doesn’t say anything.
He ignores the sarcasm. “Yes,” he says. “Something like that.”
“Seriously? That’s what you want for him?”
“What?”
“That he just… puts up with it or whatever.”
“I want him to stand up for himself,” István says. “Don’t you?”
“Of course I do.”
“So?”
She sighs in a way that makes him think he might have got through to her. But then she says, “I think we’re probably past that point here. He’s really intimidated.” And when István is still silent, “I mean he’s terrified to go to school.”
“Terrified?”
“Yes.”
“I don’t see that.”
“He is.”
“I’ve taken him to school,” István says. “I don’t see that.”
“You don’t want to see it,” she says.
This is so obviously true that he doesn’t immediately answer.
“You don’t want to see it,” she says again.
And in fact he has seen it.
Or something like it.
There’s a long silence.
It might be raining outside in the dark. There’s a sort of whispering at the windows.
“I want to talk to him,” István finally says.
“About what?”
“The whole situation.”
“Okay,” she says.
“Yeah,” he says.
She nods.

"All right," he says.

He looks at his watch and sees that it's nearly eleven.

He's not sure how he's going to sleep after this.

He might have to take a Xanax, he thinks.

It's been a while since he's done that.

It's Saturday tomorrow and there's a sense that the weekend offers an opportunity to talk to Jacob. He wonders what he's going to say to him. If it was easy to know what to say he would have done it already. As he thinks that, he's moving across the room, quietly over the wide carpets, through the pools of light at each of the lamps, and he has already taken hold of the door handle when Helen says, "Please sleep with me tonight."

They lie in the dark listening to the rain. It's the first time they've slept together for quite a long time. They're in her room. It's nice to be there. It makes it easier somehow. After sex, which he thought at first was unlikely to happen, and which was tender and silent and familiar, he falls asleep quite easily, listening to the steady sound of the rain at the open window.

When he wakes again later the sound isn't there anymore. There's just silence. It's so silent that he isn't even sure if Helen is still there, somewhere next to him on the bed.

Half-asleep, tentatively, he puts out a hand, and then a foot.

The foot finds her.

Some part of her.

He isn't sure which part.

Mild air arrives from the window and also something like light, or a sort of thinner darkness anyway, something that makes the space of the huge room around him palpable without quite being visible.

He remembers now that as they were falling asleep she said something about Thomas.

She said that it wasn't only Jacob—that she was worried about Thomas as well.

It was the last thing he wanted to hear and he didn't really respond.

Instead he stood up and opened one of the windows, letting in the sound of the rain.

She was still talking about Thomas, her voice sort of murmuring sleepily in the dark, while he stood there at the window, looking out at the rain. Or not looking at it. Listening to it. It wasn't visible. The garden was dark except for the red points of the security cameras.

She had seen Thomas.

That was what she was telling him.

For nearly two years she hadn't seen him, he had been avoiding her.

Now she was saying that she had seen him, a few weeks before.

In the morning he opens his eyes and sees the Monet oil sketch on the wall. It was a present from her first husband. For their fifth wedding anniversary or something like that. Just a simple sketch of a beach scene, a few dozen brushstrokes, about the size of a piece of letter paper. Still, a Monet, and Karl Nyman probably paid a six-figure sum for it. It's in a fairly ornate frame on the wall next to the bed and it's the first thing he sees when he opens his eyes.

He's alone in her bed now.

He wasn't aware of her leaving it.

For quite a long time during the night, after the rain had stopped, he lay awake in the silence troubled by memories and then, when light had already started to appear at the windows, he finally fell asleep again and slept until a few minutes ago.

It must be nine o'clock, or even later.

Outside the sun is shining and the room is quite light and he's looking at the small Monet without seeing it and wondering if he dreamed those things about Thomas.

That he has a drug problem now.

That after some sort of overdose incident Mathilde put him into the Priory.

That when Helen visited him there a few weeks ago he said he didn't want to see her and sent her away.

Did he dream those things?

He doesn't think so.

He looks at the Monet. A beige beach under a gray sky. Some figures on the beach, one of them holding a parasol.

As he looks at it he hears voices from the garden—the nanny's sharp voice putting a question, twice, in exactly the same tone each time, and then, after a pause, Jacob's listless answer.

The sounds draw him back to the present.

To the fact that it's Saturday morning.

That he has to talk to Jacob today.

He sits up and as he does that another sound starts—the sound of the shower in Helen's en suite.

She must be in there.

Probably she left the bed only a short while ago herself.

He moves around the room picking up his clothes from where he left them last night, and when he leaves a minute later the sound of the shower is still going on.

It's nearly four o'clock in the afternoon when he finally knocks on Jacob's door.

"How are you?" he asks him.

Jacob is sitting at his desk doing something on his laptop. "Fine," he says.

"What are you doing?"

"Playing *Minecraft*."

"Okay."

István stands at his shoulder looking at the screen.

"How long have you been playing it?" he asks.

Jacob shrugs.

"Since after lunch?" István asks.

"Maybe."

"I think you should turn it off now."

Jacob's screen time is supposed to be limited to two hours a day.

He sighs and finishes up.

"Do you want to go for a walk in the park?" István asks as he's doing that.

"No."

"It's nice out."

"I don't want to."

"So what are you going to do?"

Jacob shrugs.

He's still sitting at his desk facing the now-dead laptop screen.

István is still standing behind him.

He says, "Mummy says you want to change schools."

He says it without any sort of plan of what to say next. "Is that true?" he asks.

"No," Jacob says.

"No?"

Jacob shakes his head.

"That's what she said. Did you say that to her?"

"I didn't say that."

"What did you say?" There's a silence. It's obvious that neither of them is enjoying this. "That you're not happy at school?" István asks.

Jacob doesn't deny that.

He just sort of shrugs again.

It makes István feel very sad suddenly that this conversation is taking place at all, that it needs to take place. He says, "Mummy said you're having trouble with some of the other kids. Or one of them."

"What do you mean trouble?"

"I don't know." There's another silence. "Is it true?"

Jacob is staring fixedly at a particular point on his desk.

István tries to help him. "Mummy said this kid's name is Toby."

Jacob just keeps staring.

"You can talk to me about it," István says.

"I don't want to."

"Why not?"

"I just don't."

"You talk to Mummy about it." There's another silence. "You don't mind that she told me what you said to her?"

"No."

"She told me you wanted to change school."

"I didn't say that."

"That's what she told me."

After a few moments Jacob says, "She asked me if I wanted to."

"Okay." Jacob's phone pings as some sort of notification arrives. They both ignore it. István says, "And what did you say?"

"I said I don't know."

"You don't know?"

"No."

"So maybe you do? Want to change school."

"Maybe."

"Why? Because of this Toby?"
Jacob doesn't say anything.
István sits down on his son's bed.
There's yet another long silence, during which Jacob's phone pings again.
István isn't sure what to say.
He feels helpless.
He feels as well that a space has opened up between himself and his son. A year ago there wasn't anything that Jacob wouldn't talk to him about, in the way that it's obvious that he doesn't want to talk to him about this.
He says, "What does Toby do? Do you want to tell me about it? He's just not very nice to you or what?"
István knows Toby by sight now. He's a normal-looking kid. Maybe even slightly shorter than Jacob.
"Does he hurt you? I mean physically."
"Not really," Jacob says.
"Not really?"
"No."
"Are you sure?"
Jacob doesn't say anything.
"What does he do, then?" István asks.
"I don't know."
"He says nasty things?"
Again Jacob doesn't answer the question.
"Are you scared of him?"
There's another silence, which István takes as a yes.
He says, "Why are you scared of him?"
"I don't know," Jacob says, after yet another long silence.
Slightly anguished now, István says, "When did this start?"
"I don't know," Jacob says.
"Has he been there all the time?"
"What do you mean?"
"Since you started school."
"No."
"No?"
Jacob shakes his head.
"When did he arrive, then?" István asks.
"Last year."
"Last year?"
"Yes."
"And are other people scared of him too?"
"Sometimes."
"Do they want to leave the school?"
There's another silence.
"It's very important to stand up for yourself," István says.
"I know."
"That's very important in life."
"I know."
"That you don't let people push you around."
"I know."
"I know it's not always easy."
They agree that if Jacob still wants to leave the school at the end of the year they'll start to look for a new one.
Then, only a week later, another national lockdown is announced "to prevent a medical and moral disaster."
Again they spend it at Ayot St. Peter.
While the rain falls outside Helen and Jacob do puzzles on the long table in the library.
Helen has a whole stock of them, mostly famous paintings.
The question of Jacob changing school is put aside, or at least there doesn't seem to be any point in talking about it now.

The lockdown stretches across Christmas.
They have a quiet one at Ayot St. Peter, just the three of them plus István's mother.
On Boxing Day, they invite the Szymanskis to drink some mulled wine in the Old Stable Yard, although even that isn't technically allowed.
Mr. Szymanski's parents are there too, having arrived from the Baltic coast of Poland during the week or two in mid-December when the lockdown was temporarily eased. They're stranded in Hertfordshire now and they look slightly dazed.

"They have a fish restaurant," Mr. Szymanski explains to István as they stand in the yard.
"Okay," István says. "I suppose it's not open at the moment."
"Only for takeaway," Mr. Szymanski says.
"Okay," István says. "Who's looking after it while they're here?"
"My sister," Mr. Szymanski says.
"Okay," István says.

Helen and Jacob start a new puzzle. It's another painting.

István looks in in the late afternoon and sees them standing next to each other at the table, working on it. They're nearly the same height now.

They don't notice that he's there.

He watches them for a minute or two and then leaves.

During the miserable weeks of early January Jacob sometimes goes for walks on his own. Although he's not allowed to leave the estate it's large enough for him to disappear for an hour or two at a time.

He's just returned from one of his walks when István meets him on the south front terrace, where he's standing outside having a vape.

"Hey," he says.

Jacob doesn't seem pleased to see him. His face looks very flushed and pink, though that might just be the cold.

"We were wondering where you'd got to," István says.

"Just went for a walk."

"Okay. Have you got something under your jacket?" István asks.

"No," Jacob says.

He obviously does though, and István wonders why he would lie to him about it. "Yeah, you do," he says.

Jacob doesn't say anything.

He just turns even more red and looks alarmed.

"What is it?" István asks, meaning the thing under his jacket.

"Nothing."

"Nothing?"

Jacob is sort of edging away.

"What is it?" István asks again, smiling.

He puts out his hand as if he expects Jacob to show him whatever it is that he's hiding.

Instead Jacob turns and runs.

"Hey!" István shouts, initially too surprised to move.

Unable to imagine what it might be that he's hiding, and starting to worry about it now, István jogs after him.

Jacob is making for the woods. He's having to run slightly awkwardly in order to keep whatever it is that he has under his jacket from falling out.

Suddenly feeling absurd to be pursuing his own son like this, István stops on the damp grass of the south lawn.

Jacob has reached the margin of the woods. Without looking back he passes into them and István sees him throw something. It's hard to say what it is. It flashes for a moment among the nearly leafless trees. Jacob is still running—he didn't stop or even slow down when he threw the thing, whatever it was. He threw it as he ran, and has now disappeared into the gloom.

Not knowing what to make of this and sort of disappointed by the whole incident, István walks toward the woods, with the vague intention of trying to find whatever it was that Jacob threw away. It's late afternoon and already twilight. His breath hangs in the air in front of him. To the sound of crows, he searches among the brambles and stunted holly bushes that grow between the trees.

It's surprisingly hard to locate the thing he's looking for and he has more or less given up and is on his way back to the open grass of the south lawn when he finds it.

It's a magazine. It has obviously spent a long time outside—sunlight has faded the front cover and the pages of the whole thing are stiffly crinkled, as if they have been thoroughly wetted and then dried again many times. He sees immediately that it's soft porn. Naked women. He pages through it in the failing light under the trees. It seems clear, from its condition, that Jacob found it somewhere on the estate, in the woods or under the hedge next to the farmer's track.

István isn't sure what to do with it now. Whether he should just leave it where he found it, or dispose of it properly.

He's not sure, either, if he should speak to Jacob about it.

When he tells Helen about the whole thing, later that evening, she looks amazed.

"You don't think..." she says.

"What?"

"Does he...?"

"Does he?" István prompts.
"You know," she says.
"Masturbate?"
"Yes."
"No, I don't think so."
"I mean, he's only ten," she says.
"Yeah."
"How old were you when you...?" she asks, sounding worried.
"When I started masturbating?"
"Yes."
István shrugs. "Twelve, thirteen," he tells her.
She still looks distressed.
He says, "I'm sure he doesn't."
"Then why...?" Again she struggles to finish the question.
"Why what?"
"Why would he be interested in that magazine?"
"It just fascinates him," István says. "He's probably not even sure why himself."
"Will you talk to him about it?"
"And say what?"
"I don't know."
"He was obviously embarrassed about it," István says. "I don't want to make him more embarrassed."
He tells her how Jacob reappeared about half an hour after the incident, when it was already dark outside.
He had been wondering, he says, whether to say something about it then.
Jacob evidently didn't want him to.
The incident had to be mentioned of course, and, pretending that he hadn't found the magazine, István said, trying not to make it sound like a big deal, "What was that you were hiding?"
"Nothing," Jacob said.
"You don't want to tell me?"
"No."
"You sure?"
"Yes."
"Okay."
During that exchange, Jacob wouldn't look him properly in the eye.
Which made István feel sad.
He spends a lot of the evening thinking about it.
And also about his own life at that age, or slightly older.
Eleven, twelve, thirteen.
About the surprising new things his body wanted, and his inability to refuse it when it wanted them.
At that time even his dreams were about his own physicality, about his physical body and what was happening to it. He remembers dreaming of these black things like fat stalks of graphite erupting from the center of his chest at about the time that the first fine hairs appeared there, remembers waking up afraid and disgusted.
And all that burgeoning physicality is held within yourself as a sort of secret, even as it is also the actual surface that you present to the world, so that you're left absurdly exposed, unsure whether the world knows everything about you or nothing, because you have no way of knowing whether these experiences that you're having are universal or entirely specific to you.
Perhaps it's at that age, he thinks, that you first have the sense that you and your body are not entirely identical, that you occupy the same space without being quite the same thing, because some part of you seems to lag the transformation of your body, and to be surprised by it in the way that an outside observer might be, so that you no longer feel entirely at one with your body as you always had until then, and it starts to make sense to talk about it as if it was something slightly separate from yourself, even while you seem more powerless than ever to deny it whatever it wants. Although actually at first there seems to be no reason to deny it what it wants, whenever it wants it. Like that afternoon he and two friends watched a porn film at one of the others' apartments and ended up masturbating to it together. They hadn't exactly planned to do that when they put the video on. They obviously all wanted to though, so why not? There was a sense that this was a pleasure like any other, only of another order of intensity and with this strange aspect of compulsion about it. That it might have its own special codes of behavior hadn't yet occurred to them.
They must have been twelve or something when that happened. Only a year or two older than Jacob is now. And within just a year or two after that it was already a strange and embarrassing thing to think about. There was this feeling of did that *really* happen? In only a year or two it had become unthinkable to do something like that, to share that experience in such an innocent way, to treat it like any other form of pleasure.
"What are you thinking about?" Helen asks him.
"Nothing," he says.

He sits in the kitchen with a small whisky and his Kindle.

Jacob is also there, drawing.

He's been drawing for some time, while the rain falls outside.

He's at the table, while István occupies the old green Chesterfield near the Aga.

Occasionally he looks in Jacob's direction, and seeing how happily absorbed he seems to be in what he's doing, he doesn't say anything.

Finally, on a trip to the cupboard to pour another small measure of Macallan thirty-year-old, he says, "What are you drawing?"

Jacob pauses.

He withdraws his hands so that István can look at what he's done.

Whatever it is, it's surprisingly detailed and intricate.

"So what is this exactly?" István asks, leaning down to look at it more closely.

It seems to be a city with waterways instead of roads—a sort of futuristic Venice. Venice is obviously the inspiration anyway.

István is slightly in awe of all the thought that has gone into it, and of the skill and delicacy with which it has been drawn.

He has a sip of whisky as he surveys it.

"I'm hungry," Jacob says.

"Okay," István says. "Want something to eat?"

"Yes," Jacob says.

"What?"

"I don't know."

István puts down his glass on the corner of the long oak table and opens the fridge.

"Eggs?" he suggests.

"Okay," Jacob says.

István asks him how he wants them.

"I don't mind," Jacob says, drawing again.

"Scrambled?"

"Okay."

"How many?"

After a longish, thoughtful pause Jacob says two.

"This might be sort of supper," István tells him, mixing the eggs with a fork.

"Okay."

"Do you want some toast with them?"

"Okay."

"Some salad?"

"No thanks."

"I want you to have some salad."

"Okay."

While he makes the eggs Jacob continues to work on his drawing.

The two of them go for walks, in their Wellingtons and puffer jackets.

They walk as far as the village. Lights are on in the old parsonage, which is occupied by some successful TV producer now. Helen seemed to know who it was.

On the way back, as it starts to drizzle, they talk again about getting a dog.

It's something they've been thinking about on and off for years.

They'll do that this spring, they decide.

Probably a brown Labrador.

For a while they talk about possible names, their breath showing on the dull air as they walk.

Jacob suggests Kurt.

"Kurt?" István says, surprised.

"Yeah."

"You think so?"

"I think it's a good name for a dog," Jacob says.

"Maybe it is," István agrees.

They take the shortcut across the field and when they arrive home their boots are heavy with mud.

It's announced that schools in England will reopen on Monday, March 8.

That's in just over a week.

They decide to stay at Ayot until the seventh, since in most respects the lockdown is still in place.

Jacob obviously isn't looking forward to going back to school.

They don't talk about it much.

It's a sensitive subject.

A few days before they return to London, Helen sits down with him to discuss how he feels about it.

He isn't very forthcoming.

She and István talk about it afterward.

It pains István to think that his son might be afraid of going back to school.

In fact he doesn't.

On the Friday, Helen takes him with her to Welwyn Garden City to pick up some things from Waitrose and there's an accident as they're driving back along Homerswood Lane. A fox darts out, Helen swerves to avoid it and skids into the path of an oncoming van.

You don’t know what to do when something like that happens
The shock is so great
He just sits on a chair
He ends up sitting there all night

9

He drives to the hospital in Cambridge. There's highway for twenty minutes, and then small roads. The whole journey takes an hour.

Between Foxton and Harston he pulls over and pisses among some trees at the side of the road.

He's needed to do that since he left the highway twenty miles ago.

While he does it, while he shakes his dick at a tree trunk, two or three vehicles pass behind him. He zips himself up. Clouds glint in the sky. There's a smell of compost, of sweet decay, from a ditch.

He sits in the Bentley again, its interior cluttered with empty drinks cans and receipts from service stations, and looks over his shoulder as he pulls out.

Not long after Harston the suburbs of Cambridge start, and soon after that he arrives at the hospital.

"I'm here to see my wife," he says to the woman in reception.

She asks him for his name and then invites him to have a seat.

They're in a sort of atrium. It's a private hospital. He sits there looking at his hands while a water feature makes a trickling sound.

After a few minutes a doctor approaches him. He doesn't think he knows this doctor. She isn't the one he dealt with in March and April, although they may have spoken on the phone.

She asks him when he was last here.

Telling her, he feels embarrassed that it's been so long.

The doctor smiles sympathetically, and says she understands. She's much younger than he is.

"How is she?" István asks.

"She's pretty much the same," the doctor says.

They've moved her. She's not in the same room that she was in last time. A nurse shows him to the one she's in now and then leaves him and shuts the door.

He sits down next to the bed.

The ventilator makes quite a lot of noise. It's attached to that transparent plastic thing in her mouth. There are smaller tubes going into her nose as well, and into her arm.

As the doctor said, her condition is the same as it was when he was last here, more than a month ago. The same as it has been since they put her into this state.

He doesn't entirely understand why they *did* put her into this state. Something to do with the pressure in her skull. They said they had to do it to save her life.

Now they're waiting for something. He isn't sure what. One of the doctors asked him if he knew what happened to Michael Schumacher, and when he said that he did, the doctor told him that the situation was similar to that.

"What does that mean?" István asked.

That was when the doctor told him what it was they were waiting for.

He didn't quite understand it even at the time.

"And when will that happen?" he asked.

"I don't know," the doctor said. "Maybe never, I'm afraid."

He experiences, as he did the last time he was here and saw her like this, a feeling of immense solitude.

She is the one person, he thinks, who would be able to share his pain. Or who would at least understand the extent of the pain he was in, since she would be feeling the same thing herself.

And yet she doesn't even know what happened that day in March.

He wakes on the sofa downstairs in the gray light of the very early morning.

He has a half memory of his mother telling him, at some point, to go upstairs to bed and of him telling her that he was fine where he was.

Now, waking, he has a terrible headache.

A terrible headache and terrible thirst.

He finds his way to the kitchen and drinks directly from the tap there.

The red digits of the oven clock tell him that it's just after five in the morning.

For a moment he thinks he's going to be sick.
He waits.
Nothing happens, except that he's sweating quite heavily.
When nothing happens he wonders whether to put his fingers down his throat.
He doesn't.
He just stands there for a while, staring at the empty sink.

Every day he thinks he's going to stop doing this. It wasn't supposed to be something that went on indefinitely, that was never how he thought of it, and every day when he wakes up he feels sure that this will be the day that he stops.

When evening arrives, though, he finds it very difficult to do anything else.

There just doesn't seem to be any *point* in doing anything else.

There doesn't seem to be any point in *not* drinking.

What exactly is he saving himself for?

It's usually with that thought, or something like it, that he has his first drink.

When he's drunk there's a feeling that none of this is properly real, and that's a feeling that helps. Without that for at least part of the time every day he doesn't know what he'd do.

He knows that his mother is suffering too. For one thing she's visibly aged. It strikes him one day, that she looks like an old woman now.

She seems to have taken on the management of the estate. It must help her somehow to do that, he thinks, when he wakes in the afternoon with a strange, transparent feeling and finds her at the long table in the library with a laptop open, poring over spreadsheets and documents.

"What are you doing?" he says from the door.

Without looking at him she tells him what she's doing—something to do with a tenancy agreement or an insurance policy—and he stops listening almost immediately.

When he opens his eyes there's a stranger looking down at him.

"Who are you?" he asks.

"I'm a doctor," the man says.

István's mother is there too, standing slightly farther away.

They're in his room.

He's not sure what time of day it is.

"What happened?" he asks.

"What do you remember?" the doctor says a few seconds later.

István thinks about it.

He remembers that he went out and walked in the rain.

It was raining.

And he went out and walked in it.

The doctor nods when he tells him that.

His mother just stands there looking worried.

And there's someone else there too, nearer the door. A tall woman with reddish hair. It might be Mrs. Szymanski.

"What else do you remember?" the doctor asks him.

He remembers the rain soaking through his clothes, and the wet clothes hanging cold and heavy on him.

He wonders if it's still raining.

For a moment he looks at the window.

It doesn't seem to be.

It's hard to tell though, because the curtains are almost fully drawn.

The light in the room is dim.

"I don't know," he says.

"You fell," his mother tells him.

"I fell?"

"Yes," his mother says.

The doctor nods.

István is looking up at him, almost up his nose.

His head, he notices, is throbbing with pain.

"When? Where?" he says.

His mother starts to explain that they found him on the steps of the Greek temple, that he must have slipped on the wet, slimy steps and hit his head on them or on one of the pillars of the temple.

He has no memory of any of that.

There's just nothing.

He remembers the wet clothes.

And then being here, looking up at the doctor.

"When you didn't come back we went to look for you," his mother says.

She explains that she saw him walking away across the south lawn from her bedroom window at about eight in the morning.

When there was no sign of him two hours later, she and the Szymanskis went to look for him, she says.

It was still raining, they went with umbrellas.

Mrs. Szymanski found him.

"What time is it now?" István asks.

"Two in the afternoon," the doctor says.

He says it without looking at his watch or anything.

He asks István to say the months of the year in reverse order, starting with December.

"December," István says, not sure why he needs to do this. He tries to focus, which makes the pain in his head worse. There's a dull pain everywhere inside his head, and a sharper more intense pain near the surface in one particular place. He says, "December. November. October. September." He has to stop and think. "August. July. June. May. April. March. February. January."

The doctor looks pleased.

He asks István who the prime minister is.

István tells him.

The doctor smiles and asks him a few more questions about how he's feeling, whether he has a headache, whether he feels sick.

István says that he has a headache.

After shining a light in his eyes, the doctor tells him that he has a concussion, and that he should stay in bed for the rest of the day and take it easy for the next few days. He should let him know, he says, if his headache persists for more than twenty-four hours, or if he feels dizzy or nauseated.

"Okay," István says.

"And he shouldn't drink alcohol," his mother says, as if it's a point that she's been wanting to make for a while.

"No," the doctor agrees, with a friendly smile.

Then he leaves.

István's mother and Mrs. Szymanski leave with him.

Mrs. Szymanski returns twenty minutes later with a tea tray.

"How are you feeling?" she asks.

"Okay," István says.

She says that she'll change the bandage on his head later—the doctor explained to her how to do it.

István wasn't even aware that he had a bandage on his head.

"Okay," he says.

There's something terrible about the way normality asserts itself. About the way that summer insists on happening. About the way the chestnuts blossom and Wimbledon takes place.

His mother talks to him about the estate, about various trivial things that need to be dealt with, and also about the larger matter of the Nyman trust fund.

She has spoken to Heath, the lawyer in London. She explained to him that she would be dealing with things until her son was able to take over again.

Heath was unsure about that at first. He wanted to hear it from István himself. So István phoned him and told him that his mother would indeed be handling things for a while. Heath sent him something to sign to make it official.

Once she has access to the documents, his mother spends a lot of time looking at what's been going on with the trust fund.

She makes some adjustments. She tells István about them, tells him that she's trying to maximize the income from the fund.

He doesn't seem that interested, and after a while his mother sighs and says that in less than a year Thomas will inherit it all outright anyway.

"Is there any way of stopping that?" he asks her.

"No," she says. "Unless he dies."

She has started going to a Baptist church in Stevenage.

One Sunday she suggests that he join her.

"What have you got to lose?" she asks.

He doesn't seem to have anything to lose.

It's a modest red-brick church in a quiet part of Stevenage.

He finds somewhere to park and they walk in.

Inside, there's obviously been some renovation work. It's all very light and airy. White undecorated spaces. Hard-wearing gray carpet. It feels more like a conference center than a traditional church. They sit on molded plastic seats, facing a lectern from which a man in

jeans and a T-shirt speaks to them. There's also a drum kit up there and some sort of electric piano. The only thing to show it's a church is a plain wooden cross on the wall.

The first week he just sits there, not even listening most of the time as the man in the T-shirt talks about the Bible.

The second week—when his mother persuades him to accompany her again—he does listen to some of it.

The third week he even joins in with some of the singing.

He understands, as he mouths the words, what's happening here.

He desperately wants to believe that his son still exists—still exists in some actual sense, not just as a memory—and that what happened to him is somehow part of some larger plan or scheme, and not just a meaningless single event.

What these people believe seems to make that possible. He assumes that that's what drew his mother here, or something like it. She has never shown any interest in this sort of thing until now. So he understands why she comes here and how it might help her.

He also understands, after a few weeks, that it won't be able to help him.

He knows it's not true, that's the problem.

He wants to believe that his son still exists, and his desire to believe that is almost enough to make him believe everything else that he needs to believe in order to make that possible, but not quite. The part of him that knows those things aren't true is just too strong for him to overcome.

Soon after that he starts drinking again. Sometimes when he's drunk he has the feeling that he and Jacob will be reunited in the future. It's not that he thinks they will actually meet again in any sort of afterlife or anything like that. He knows that they won't. He knows that the only sense in which they will be reunited is that one day he will also revert to being insentient matter, and sometimes when he's drunk that seems like a strangely comforting idea.

He tells Mrs. Szymanski about it.

She looks at him sadly. "You shouldn't think like that," she says.

He shrugs.

"Are you saying you want to die?" she asks him.

"I don't know," he says.

They talk quite a lot now.

Probably it started during those days in the early part of the summer when he was recovering from the concussion.

"What about you?" he asks her one day.

"What about me?"

"How are you?"

She laughs at that.

"Why do you laugh?"

She just shrugs. She's ironing.

He's still waiting for her to say something though.

"I don't know," she finally says.

"Are you happy?" he asks her.

"Not really," she says.

"No?"

She shakes her head.

"Why not?"

She shrugs again.

He leaves it at that.

He is not, in fact, that interested in whether she is happy or not and why.

And she doesn't seem to want to talk about it anyway.

Then a few days later she says, "You asked me why I wasn't happy."

"Yeah."

She's unloading the dishwasher. She keeps doing that while she tells him that she and her husband have been trying for a baby for years without success.

"I'm sorry," István says.

"So," she says. "Maybe that's why."

"I'm sorry," István says again after a silence. "Have you tried IVF?" he asks.

"Of course," she says.

"Okay."

"It didn't work."

They talk about it for a while, or at least she does.

Eventually he stops listening.

"You're not interested," she says when she notices that.

"Sure I am," he says.

She keeps talking. She says that she's disappointed at how her life has turned out.

"Why?" he asks.

"I just am," she says.

"Well," he says, as if to point out that she's not the only one.

They walk on the estate together. She talks about her husband. She says that her husband doesn't seem to understand her, that she's not sure whether the marriage will last.

"Do you want it to last?" István asks her.

When she just shrugs he asks her if she loves her husband.

"I don't know," she says. And then, "I think I love somebody else."

"Oh yeah?"

She nods.

They've stopped walking and are standing on the path.

"Who's that?" he asks, smiling at her.

"You," she says.

He laughs, partly just with surprise.

"What?" she says.

"When did this start?" he asks her.

"I don't know," she says.

They have sex for the first time a few days later. He's not sure why he does it. He thinks it might help him somehow.

Afterward he feels slightly disgusted with himself.

He tells her that he wishes they hadn't done it.

Then a few days later they do it again.

And again a few days after that.

While they're actually doing it, it feels like a sort of escape. There's an oblivion there, and something satisfyingly like violence as well. It seems to give him something that violence would also give him, something physical and destructive, something that he seems to need.

She keeps saying that she loves him.

"Stop saying that," he tells her.

"It's true," she says.

"No it's not," he says.

"What do you mean?"

At that moment, more than anything else, he just wishes that she wasn't there, and while he smokes his cigarette and she wipes her eyes he promises himself that he's not going to have sex with her again.

Then a few days later he does.

And it's not just the physical need and the minute of oblivion that makes him do it, he thinks. It's that in a way he actually enjoys the feelings of self-hatred that always follow his encounters with her.

He starts to hate her as well, and he finds a sort of enjoyment in that, too.

He finds a sort of enjoyment in hurting her, emotionally and sometimes even physically. "You're hurting me," she says as he squeezes her neck, and he understands that he was inflicting the pain on her deliberately and for his own pleasure, or at least for some form of satisfaction that it gave him.

He thinks he's probably not as nice a person as he thought he was.

He's probably not a very nice person at all.

He tells her that. "I'm not a very nice person," he says.

She says that that isn't true.

And something about the way she says it makes him want to hurt her even more.

Cambridge is plastered with wet leaves. He spends less than half an hour at the hospital and for most of that time he's talking to the doctor, who sounds more pessimistic than she did before.

Afterward he's in the Bentley and is about to start the engine when he sees a black BMW arrive at the hospital entrance.

It seems to be a hire limousine, delivering a visitor, and since it's in his way and he's unable to leave while it's there, he keeps his eyes on it until someone emerges.

At first the person, seen from behind and across the width of the parking area, looks only vaguely familiar. It's a young man, dressed mostly in black. Further obscuring his identity, he's also wearing sunglasses, and has a beard.

There's no doubt about it though.

It is Thomas.

The way he moves, as much as anything, makes István sure of that, even though he sees him for only a few seconds as he leaves his limo and enters the hospital.

He's gone almost before István is sure that it's him. But he is sure, and he sits there for quite a long time after he has disappeared into the building.

He sits there, in fact, until he emerges again, after about half an hour, stepping out through the automatic door and signaling to his driver to wait a bit longer.

He wants to smoke a cigarette first, that's why.

István hasn't seen him since that evening at the Gagosian, nearly three years ago.

He was thinking about that evening all the time that Thomas was inside the hospital, and he's still thinking about it now as he watches him smoke his cigarette.

When he has finished it, Thomas waves to the BMW, which leaves its parking space and pulls up in front of him.

It drives away, and for a few moments after that István doesn't move.

Then, as if suddenly arriving at a decision, he starts the engine of his own vehicle and drives after it, keeping his distance as he follows it along the tree-lined street of Victorian villas at the end of which the hospital is located.

For a while they pass through other, similar streets.

They seem to be heading for the highway and when they arrive at it he follows the BMW onto the on ramp. He keeps it in view as it does a steady seventy toward London, which he assumes is where they're going.

The land, very flat around Cambridge, starts to pick up slightly into modest hills. Mostly it's plowed fields. The odd stand of trees.

Almost imperceptibly at first, London starts to solidify around them.

István isn't very familiar with this approach to it and for quite a long time he's not sure where they are.

Then he suddenly understands that they're on the North Circular near Ilford, where he used to live. They even pass under the pedestrian bridge that he often used in those days on his way home from running on Wanstead Flats.

He doesn't have much time to think about that though—the traffic is heavy and he needs to focus on staying in touch with the BMW.

On the highway that was quite easy.

Now it's much harder.

At every traffic light there's the possibility of losing it.

The trouble is he has no idea where it's going.

He follows it through Wanstead.

In Hackney a bus, pulling out, separates him from it, and for a few minutes he loses sight of it altogether.

It's still there though, not far ahead of him.

It finally stops somewhere in Islington.

He has to pass it and pull over farther up, where there's a space.

They're in a quiet square of terraced houses with gardens in the middle, surrounded by railings.

He watches in the mirror as Thomas emerges from the BMW and pushes the doorbell of one of the houses.

A few seconds later he goes in.

The BMW is still there, presumably having been told to wait.

István waits as well.

It's nearly dark now. The sky above the square is a vivid blue.

He lights a cigarette.

It might be hours, of course.

In fact it's only four or five minutes before Thomas reappears.

They head farther into central London, along Euston Road and down Regent Street. They spend some time in traffic on Piccadilly, and when they arrive at Hyde Park Corner they use the underpass. For half a minute they're in its orange light and onrushing noise, and then they're under the dark sky again, and the BMW positions itself for an immediate left turn.

István takes the turn deliberately slowly himself, trying to increase the distance between them. The BMW is about fifty meters ahead of him now.

It turns left again, and he follows it a few seconds later, almost too late to see it make yet another left turn into a mews-like street that's marked as a dead end.

Thinking that this must be it, he pulls over a short way into the mews and switches off.

From there he is able to see the BMW, still about fifty meters ahead of him, and also stationary now.

The mews is very quiet. Almost all of its houses are unlit. Even the pub about halfway up, although fully illuminated, seems strangely inactive, as if it might not even be open this Friday night.

Thomas is letting himself into one of the houses while the BMW starts to perform a three-point turn.

A few seconds later it passes István on its way out of the mews.

For quite a long time after that he just sits there.

A light has come on in the house that Thomas went into.

István wonders if he lives there alone—if he's alone in there or if anyone else is there with him.

He leaves the Bentley and stands in front of the two-story house, the brick façade of which is painted dark gray. There are small trees in planters on either side of the front door.

He is about to press the doorbell, when he stops himself.

He really does want to know if Thomas is alone.

The curtains of the ground-floor windows are not quite fully drawn and, stepping across the cobbles, he brings his face to the gap. The room he sees looks somehow underfurnished. It's like a rental house that only has the bare bones—a sofa, a few chairs, not much more than that. There's nothing on the walls except some weird lighting fixtures involving metal leaves.

He's just taking that in when Thomas appears, in a dressing gown now, and sits down on the sofa.

There's no sign of anyone else.

István steps back and peers up at the higher windows—all dark.

He looks up and down the mews—no one.

Before ringing the doorbell he again brings his face to the gap in the curtains, which is about the width of his hand.

Thomas is still sitting on the sofa.

He's doing something.

It's not clear what.

He seems to be heating something with the flame of a lighter, a spoonful of something.

A few moments later István understands.

The first time he saw this was in Iraq, where it was a habit that some of the men developed. The stuff was quite easily available there, and not very expensive.

He never tried it himself. Some of the others smoked a bit of it. Only a very few of them, though, went on to do what Thomas is doing now. He has put the spoon down on the low glass table in front of him, which is one of the few other pieces of furniture in the room. Then he draws the liquid that's in the bowl of the spoon into a syringe he must have had in the pocket of his dressing gown.

He uses the belt of the dressing gown for the next part, tying it around his upper arm and then holding the end of it in his teeth to pull it tight. With the belt still in his mouth, and his head at an odd angle to keep it tight, he physically stimulates the inner elbow of his left arm. When he has done that he takes the syringe. He holds it up and applies a small amount of pressure to the plunger until some liquid drips out. Then, focusing intently, he turns his attention to his arm.

His teeth finally release the belt.

He lies back on the sofa and the syringe slides out of his hand.

For a long time, half sitting on the sofa and half lying on it, he doesn't move at all. He seems to be staring at something on the ceiling.

From his position at the window István is able to see his expressionless face.

He has been looking at it with amazement for a minute or two when he notices that there's something slightly strange about it. Something more than mere expressionlessness—an emptiness behind the eyes.

And there's something else as well.

A sort of darkness of the lips.

At first István isn't sure if he's actually seeing that, or if he's just imagining it.

After another minute, there's no doubt.

Thomas's lips are distinctly blue.

István saw this in Iraq too, and also once or twice since then in the toilets of nightclubs where he was working.

He understands what it means.

Thomas is asphyxiating.

He took too much.

István isn't sure, suddenly, whether that was accidental or not. His first assumption, when he noticed it, was that it was. Now, thinking about it, he isn't sure.

It might have been an accident, it might have been deliberate, it might have been not quite either.

In any case Thomas is definitely dying.

His lungs have stopped working properly. Deprived of oxygen it will only be a matter of minutes before he dies.

István stands there watching him through the gap in the curtains.

He's not sure what he feels.

Mostly a sort of emptiness.

After maybe another minute, he turns and walks toward the Bentley.

He unlocks it and sits at the wheel.

Something, however, makes it hard for him to start the engine and drive away, which is what he thought he was going to do.

He just sits there, staring out through the windshield at the mews.

He knows that every minute that passes makes it more likely that Thomas will die, alone in that empty room.

And still he sits there, not leaving, and not doing anything to help him either, just staring out through the windshield at the silent mews, with its single streetlamp throwing shadowy light onto the cobbles and the fallen leaves and the parked luxury cars.

He isn't looking at those things though.
His thoughts are elsewhere, they are somewhere far away.
His hands are shaking as he lights a cigarette.
He has smoked about half of it when he takes out his phone.

He tells the paramedics the truth, more or less. That Thomas is his wife's son, that he was there to see him, and that when he didn't answer the door he looked in at the window and saw what had happened.

After forcing the front door the paramedics bring Thomas out on a stretcher.

"Is he?" István asks.

"He's not dead," one of them tells him.

István nods. He's standing next to one of the potted miniature trees that flank the entrance of the house.

And in fact the mews has some life in it after all—from the doorways of some of the other houses, and from windows, people are looking out to see what's happening, to see the paramedics load the stretcher into the ambulance with its silently flashing blue lights.

"He would have been, in a few more minutes," the paramedic says to István. "Lucky for him you were here."

"Maybe," István says.

"Definitely," the paramedic insists.

István asks him which hospital they're taking Thomas to.

UCL, the man tells him. "You coming with us?" he wants to know.

István shakes his head.

He watches the ambulance drive away.

He wonders what to do now.

He isn't sure what has happened here tonight.

By the time he arrives at Cheyne Walk it has started to rain.

Sitting on the sofa in the second-floor drawing room he phones his mother and tells her that he's in London and won't be back tonight.

"Okay," she says.

When she asks him what he's doing in London and he tells her what happened she is silent for a long time.

"Are you still there?" he finally asks.

"Yes," she says. "I'm still here."

She doesn't say anything else though.

In his own room on the floor above he partially undresses and lies down on the bed.

It's surprising that he isn't hungry. He hasn't eaten anything since lunch, which he had at Ayot St. Peter before driving to the hospital in Cambridge.

He opens the window and lights a cigarette.

It has already stopped raining. There's just the sound of water dripping from the trees in the dark. He wonders again what it is that has happened tonight. He has a strange feeling that something very significant has happened, only he isn't sure what.

In the morning he drives to University College Hospital, where they tell him that Thomas is still unconscious. They suggest that István, if he wants to see him, try again the next day.

When he does, however, he's told that Thomas isn't there anymore.

"Where is he?" he asks, surprised.

The nurse says that he transferred himself to another hospital, a private one.

"He's awake, then?" István says. "Does he know what happened?"

"What happened?" the nurse says.

"How he got here."

"Well, we told him that his father found him..."

"His father?"

"Yes."

"*I* found him," István says.

"Yes," the nurse says.

"I'm not his father," István tells her.

"Okay," the nurse says. There's an awkward moment. She says, "He seemed to know who we meant."

"Where is he now?" István asks. "Which hospital?"

She doesn't want to say at first, now that she knows that István isn't Thomas's father.

In the end, though, he persuades her to tell him.

It's a place just outside London.

He drives there, through the suburbs and the autumn rain.
At reception they confirm that Thomas is a patient.
“Can I see him?” István asks, after explaining who he is.
They send someone to tell Thomas that István is there.
A few minutes later the person returns.
“I’m sorry,” they say to István. “He says he doesn’t want to see you.”

10

"So you worked in England for some years?" the manager asks, looking at István's CV.

"That's right."

"Why did you come back?"

"Family reasons," István says.

The man seems satisfied with that, or at least he doesn't ask anything else about it.

He asks what sort of work István did in England.

István says that he was a security driver, and that he also worked on the doors of nightclubs and other places.

When the man asks why he's not looking for that sort of thing now—door work at a nightclub or whatever—István says it's mainly about the hours.

"Anyway," he says, "that's more of a young man's game."

The store manager, who's about his own age, nods with something like sympathy.

He's looking at the CV again. He says, "And then for the last twelve years... what's this?"

It's true that the CV isn't very explicit about the last twelve years. It just says "Self-employed."

"I had my own business," István explains.

The man wants to know more.

István tells him that it was a hospitality business, and that it failed during Covid.

"Yeah?"

István nods.

He's already been through all this with the store's head of security.

Neither the head of security nor the store manager seem entirely persuaded by him.

It's not his age.

There are a lot of older men doing this sort of work.

It's something else.

There's something odd about him, they seem to feel, something that doesn't quite fit.

As they both point out however, there's a serious shortage of qualified staff these days and in the end they offer him the job anyway.

The store is the Media Markt in the town's main shopping mall. He either works nine a.m. to six p.m. or noon to nine in the evening. Sometimes, when someone's off sick, or leaves suddenly for another job, they ask him to do the full nine-to-nine shift, with double pay for the extra three hours. When they ask him to do that he usually agrees.

He wears a white T-shirt with a sort of black gilet over it, an earpiece in his ear, and a walkie-talkie attached to his waist.

There are five of them on the security team. István is the oldest, though not by much. Only Béla, the head of the team, is significantly younger than him. He's about thirty and has an immaculately executed skin fade. It always looks like he had it done yesterday. He takes the work very seriously and organizes team meetings where he talks about "strategy" and "performance."

The older men pretend to listen.

In fact, most of the time, there's not a lot to do.

Either you're out front or you're looking at the screens. They take turns, the two of them who are on duty at any particular time. Even though you're on your feet, it's easier to be out front in a way. If you're on the screens it's harder to stay focused for long stretches.

Every two hours or so there's a ten-minute break. Usually István takes the escalator up to the roof of the shopping mall to have a cigarette. The roof is also the car park. The escalator arrives in a glass box that houses the machines you use to pay for the parking. He tries to find a quiet spot to smoke his cigarette. In the middle of the shift he also eats his sandwiches.

After work he most often walks home.

When it's raining he takes the bus.

Most often though, he walks.

There's the footbridge over the train tracks and then the long walk through nondescript streets up the hardly perceptible slope of the hill to the housing estate.

His mother usually has supper ready for him.

As he takes his shoes off in the hall he hears her putting things on the table.

"How was your day?" she asks him.

He sits down, smoothing his hair with his hand and looking at what there is—breaded chicken, maybe, with sticky rice and some leaves of green salad.

"Yeah, okay," he says.

When they've eaten he washes the dishes. It doesn't take long and by the time he's finished it she already has the TV on.

He joins her on the sofa, and they watch the Hungarian version of *The Apprentice* or *The Voice* or something like that.

At about ten, usually when the news is just starting, he tells her that he's going to bed.

"Okay," she says. "Sleep well."

He stands in the dubious-smelling cubicle of the toilet and then brushes his teeth at the sink in the separate small bathroom.

About a year ago he became addicted to sleeping pills. He was having trouble sleeping and the doctor prescribed them. He's more or less over that now. There's just a vague feeling that something's missing at this point of the day.

He undresses down to his pants and smokes a last cigarette leaning out his bedroom window, looking at the quiet housing estate.

His mother is still watching TV and the sound of it finds its way through the wall as he lies down on his bed and looks at the pattern of light that the lampshade puts on the ceiling.

After about a year he thinks it might be nice to have a dog. Maybe a brown Labrador called Kurt. Obviously that was Jacob's idea. And in fact the whole dog idea is about Jacob. He's perfectly aware of that.

They sell puppies at the Sunday market, which isn't far from his mother's apartment. Even though it's only eight in the morning when he arrives, there are already hundreds of people there. There's the smell of frying and the sound of announcements over the public address system. Political parties have set up stands in one place and on makeshift terraces men are already drinking beer.

In one part of the market there's a double line of trees along a sort of track, on each side of which the puppies and other animals are displayed. The people who are selling them park their cars end-on to the track with the animals in the open trunks of the cars.

It's always one of the most crowded parts of the market, with a lot of people moving along the track, looking at the animals in their cages.

István moves slowly with the crowd, looking for brown Labradors. He finds some in one of the last cars, at the end of the track where the trees are smaller and the shade starts to give out. The puppies, four of them, are in a cardboard box full of shredded paper. There are some other people already looking at them and István stands there, waiting his turn. The man selling the puppies seems slightly impatient with the children who are looking at them now—probably because he thinks that they are just looking. The children are asking him questions and he's giving them surly monosyllabic answers between pulls on his cigarette. István can't hear, above the noise of the market, what the children are asking.

After a while, as he waits there, he becomes aware that people are looking at him in a strange way.

Then the person standing next to him asks him something.

He asks him if he's okay.

István just nods.

The PA system plays its jingle and makes some echoing announcement.

Even the man selling the puppies is looking at him now, and after a few more seconds István turns and walks away.

He walks for quite a long time, until there aren't people around him anymore and the sounds of the market seem to arrive from a slight distance.

He's among secondhand cars.

He has walked as far as the secondhand car market, which consists of dealers' huts with the vehicles they're selling gathered around them in the glare of the sun. From the nearest hut two men watch him suspiciously as, standing next to a twenty-year-old BMW SUV, he clears his throat and wipes his eyes with his hand. He inhales deeply through his nose and feels in his pocket for his cigarettes. It has been a long time, more than a year, since anything like this has happened. And it's not quite over yet. Standing there next to the old BMW, he starts to sob again. He knows that he won't be able to stop until it's over and he doesn't even try to.

The men watch him from the hut.

Seeing them he waves apologetically, and after a few seconds they look away.

Sometimes he misses Helen. It's only now that he fully understands what a significant part she played in his life. A more significant part than anyone else probably. In a way, that's obvious. In another way though, it surprises him. Or it seems strange somehow, to put it like that. He's not sure why. Something to do with how things started with her maybe. It just never occurred to him then, during those first months when they started having sex, that she might end up playing such a significant part in his life. He's not the same person he would have been if he had never known her. The way he thinks about a lot of things is her way of thinking about them, and his memories of a lot of other things are inseparable from memories of her.

One day he finds the naked pictures that she sent him from that hotel in Munich, nearly twenty years ago. He had forgotten about them, but they're still there in Facebook Messenger if he scrolls back far enough. He looks at them with, initially, a kind of archaeological interest. Then, experiencing an unanticipated stirring of arousal, he undoes his trousers and masturbates just sitting in front of the laptop, sometimes pausing his action to move to one of the other pictures.

After he has come he feels sort of silly and ashamed.

He's aware of how absurd he must look, sitting there in front of the laptop with his trousers at his knees.

He's also suddenly very aware of the fact that Helen is dead, or his perception of the fact that she's dead changes. There's a deep immovable sadness that wasn't there before.

With a tissue he wipes the small amount of grayish semen from his thigh where it fell.

His dick has shrunk to almost nothing now, has almost disappeared into the tangle of his pubic hair, which has definitely started to turn white, or at least there are a significant number of white hairs now among the darker ones.

He does up his trousers again.

The picture of Helen, as she was then, naked in that hotel in Munich, is still there on the screen.

She would be happy, he thinks, if she knew that he was still doing this, that he was still, at least very occasionally, thinking of her in this way.

Sometimes, after supper, he goes out for a drink.

There's this place not far from the apartment. It's down some steps from the sidewalk, underground. The floor tiles crudely depict bunches of grapes and a sign above the entrance says IN VINO VERITAS. He's not sure if that's the name of the place or what. It might be.

Inside there are plastic plants and neon tubes and backlit pictures of well-known local landmarks. An illuminated Coca-Cola sign over the bar.

He nods hello to half-drunk old men, and then sits at a table on his own with his white wine spritzer.

He almost always sits on his own.

Normally he drinks two spritzers and then leaves.

When he's finished the first one he takes the empty glass to the bar for the second. Seeing him approach, Bori starts to prepare it, ladling the wine into the glass and then adding soda from the hose.

He likes Bori.

They talk sometimes.

When there's not much going on she sometimes stands near his table and they talk about things.

Sometimes they find themselves smoking together on the steps up to the street.

She's a tall woman of about his own age, or slightly older. There's something attractive about her personality. She's tough and straightforward. There's also something physically attractive about her, he finds, even though objectively she's sort of ugly. It's interesting how that happens. Sometimes he fantasizes about having some sort of affair with her.

And in fact they do have a sort of affair.

One night, when she's locking up and he's still hanging around smoking a last cigarette, she asks him if he wants to come back to her place.

He's not sure what she means by that. She asked the question in such a matter-of-fact way that he assumes she just means for a drink.

"Where do you live?" he asks her.

It's in another part of the town.

"Yeah, okay," he says.

She drives them there.

They drink a bottle of white wine that she has open in her fridge, and then another one.

When the second bottle's empty she asks him if he's going to stay the night.

It's quite late now.

"Is that okay?" he asks.

"If you want," she says.

"Sure," he says.

She says she's going to get ready for bed.

"Should I sleep here?" he asks, meaning the sofa.

"You can sleep where you want," she says.

She leaves and he hears the bathroom door shut.

It's a small panel apartment, not unlike his mother's except that it's in a much taller building.

There's the same sort of little balcony though, and he stands out there with her straggly tomato plants, far from sober, smoking a cigarette and looking at the twinkling lights of the town.

She's in the bathroom for quite a long time, and when she's finished he takes his turn.

Making his way back through the hall he notices that she's left the bedroom door partly open.

He taps on it.

"Yes," she says, and he puts his head in.

She's under the duvet. The sight of her naked shoulders interests him, and she seems to be looking at him in an inviting way.

He's still worried that he'll misinterpret something though. "Shall I sleep on the sofa, then?" he says.

"If that's what you want," she says.

"It's not what I want," he says.

In the morning it's awkward.

There's that thing of not knowing how to act.

They edge past each other in the small spaces of the apartment.

It's strange to see her in a dressing gown—almost stranger than seeing her naked.

She makes coffee.

"Where's your husband?" he asks her.

"He's traveling," she says.

"Yeah?"

Her husband's a truck driver. István knows that.

She says that he drives to Italy usually.

He's normally away for a few days a week.

"Okay," István says.

"Are you working today?" she asks.

He nods.

"What time you start?"

"Nine," he tells her.

He thanks her for the coffee.

"That's all right," she says.

Half an hour later he leaves and waits for the elevator. He needs a shit. He didn't want to take one in her apartment, of course.

The elevator has bright orange doors. Everything else in the stairwell is gray.

The next time he stays the night at her place it's a Tuesday and he's not working the next day.

She asks him, as she makes the coffee, if he feels like going for a walk.

"Yeah, okay," he says.

"It's a nice day," she points out.

"It is," he agrees.

She has a small car, a white Fiat Panda, and they drive a little way out of the town, into the hills. There's a Communist-era TV tower at the top of one of them, and trails through the forest around it. On the north sides of the hills the forest is mostly mature beech and pine. On the south side it's mainly younger oaks, and the path is drier and stonier.

"I like walking here," she says.

"Sure," he says.

He spends the night at her place a few more times.

Waking up in her bed is something he gets sort of used to.

The room is very messy.

It's summer and during the night the air conditioner that her husband installed last year blows cold air onto them.

There are these dark red curtains. When he wakes up he sees them glowing as the sun hits them from the other side.

The air conditioner is off now and the room feels slightly stuffy.

She brings him coffee in bed and then takes off her dressing gown and joins him under the duvet again.

"Thanks," he says.

She has a nice body for a woman of her age, he thinks—thin and long-limbed, though with large breasts that are starting to hang down. He finds himself secretly wishing that he'd seen them twenty years ago, and then one day she says that she wishes he'd seen them then too, only she says thirty years ago not twenty. "They used to be really nice," she says.

"They still are," he says.

And she says, "I know you're just being polite."

For a while they spend quite a lot of time together. They go for walks in the forest and have supper in town at the Tex-Mex place, which is still there, though somewhat different from how it used to be.

He tells her about his life.

For instance, she asks him if he was ever married.

"Yeah," he says. "I was."

"Divorced?" she asks.

He shakes his head.

"No?"

"She died," he tells her.

Another time he tells her that he had a son who's dead too. That in fact they died in the same accident. Talking about it feels strange, like he's talking about someone else's life or something. He doesn't usually tell people about it.

"I'm sorry," she says.

"It's okay," he says.
"You don't mind talking about it?"
"No, I don't mind."
"This was in England?" she asks.
He's already told her that he lived there for nearly twenty years.
"Yeah," he says.
After a few drinks, he talks to her about his life in England.
He tells her that he was extremely wealthy there for a while.
"Yeah?"
"Yeah," he says.
"Like?" she wants to know.
"Helicopters," he says. "Private jets."
"Seriously?"
"Yes."
She makes a face at him across the table in the Tex-Mex place.
"It's true," he says. "I promise."
He shows her some pictures on his phone.
When she asks him what happened, how he lost it all, he says that his wife had a son from her first marriage and that he got everything when he was twenty-five.
"Everything?"
"Yes."
"You didn't have anything of your own?" she asks him.
"No," he says.
Which isn't quite true of course.
He did have things of his own.
The various development projects that he did with loans from the Nyman trust fund, they were all in his name, as well as valuable possesions like the Bentley and the watches, the Audemars Piguet and the 1953 Rolex Submariner.
In the interests of keeping the story simple though, he doesn't tell her about those things. He doesn't tell her that as soon as Thomas took possession of his inheritance, he started a legal action against István claiming that all the loans that the trust fund had made to István's projects over the years were in fact against the terms of the trust and should therefore be annulled and paid back immediately, which was in itself enough to bankrupt what was left of the projects. And because the assets were now worth less than the value of the loans, István was unable to pay back the money in full, at which point Thomas's lawyers went after him personally. In the end declaring himself bankrupt was the only way out, and that was what he did. Unfortunately it involved handing over everything of value that he still owned, and it was at that point that he and his mother decided to leave England and move back to the town in Hungary where they had once lived, and where his mother still had her apartment.

Bori tells him about her life. "It's not as interesting as yours," she says.
"What do you mean?"
"As a story."
"No?"
They're in bed. The window's open and there's the sound of individual voices, indistinct, from outside. He's smoking a cigarette.
"No," she says.
"Tell me about it," he says.
"There isn't much to tell."
"I'm sure that's not true."
"Yes, it is," she says.
He asks her how long she's worked at the wine cellar.
She tells him for about twenty years.
"I like it there," she says, as if she feels she needs to explain it somehow, that she's been there so long.
"Sure," he says.
"They're nice people."
"They are."
She says that the only interesting thing about her life is that she has a daughter who's in her thirties now.
"Yeah?" he says, surprised.
She says that she was fifteen when her daughter was born. She put her up for adoption. She lives in Holland now. She's spent most of her life there. Bori knows that because she contacted her about five years ago.
"She contacted you?" István says.
"Yes."
"How?"
"On Facebook."

"What did she say?"

"Just that she was my daughter, and that she wanted to meet me. The message was in English," she says. "She doesn't speak Hungarian."

"Okay."

"So she wrote in English. I had to use Google Translate."

"How did you feel?" István asks.

"When I got the message?"

"Yes."

"I don't know. Happy. And sad. I don't know."

"Why sad?"

"I don't know."

He stubs out his cigarette. He takes his time over it. "Did you meet her?" he asks.

"Of course."

"Where?"

"In Budapest."

"And?"

"It was nice. It was nice to know that she's okay."

"Of course. Are you still in touch?" he asks.

"Sometimes."

When he takes her hand one day as they walk in the town she says, "Don't do that."

"Okay," he says.

In fact he only did it because he thought she might want him to. He's actually pleased that she doesn't. He likes that about her, that she's not the sort of person who wants to hold hands.

They sit down at a terrace and order drinks.

The terrace is on the edge of a paved open space surrounded by concrete buildings. Kids mess about on skateboards in the middle of the space, where there's the sort of municipal sculpture that nobody ever particularly notices or thinks about.

The kids' voices are still echoing around the space when they leave and walk to a kebab shop that they like nearby.

After that they go back to her place.

It feels quite ordinary and domestic now, to take the elevator up and let themselves into the apartment.

The affair, or whatever it is, lasts for about a year.

Then Bori ends it. She says that she doesn't want her husband to find out, and she's worried that if they don't stop he eventually will.

"Okay," István says.

She's looking at him with a slightly worried expression.

"I understand," he says.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

It's eight in the morning. She told him they needed to end it while they had coffee in the kitchen after spending the night together.

Now they're in her narrow entrance hall. He's putting on the ugly square-toed black shoes that he wears to work.

"Are you going to be okay?" she asks him.

"Sure," he says.

And in fact she's the one with tears in her eyes.

He's surprised to see them.

One of them slides down her face.

"Hey," he says, wiping it away. "It's okay."

She nods.

"It's okay," he says again.

He works at Media Markt for many years.

At one point he turns down a promotion to deputy head of security.

"May I ask why?" the store manager says. It's not the same store manager who originally offered him the job. He left years ago. The head of security from that era has moved on as well.

"I don't know. It's just not for me," István says.

"I would tend to disagree," the store manager says.

"Thank you."

"So?"

István shakes his head.

"You're definitely turning it down?" the manager asks. He looks slightly irritated, as if he just doesn't understand. He's at least twenty years younger than István.

"Yes," István says.

"All right."

"That's all?"

"That's all."

He leaves the manager's office and takes the escalator up to the roof to have a cigarette.

And then, about ten years after they move back to the town, his mother dies.

She just dies in her sleep.

That happens sometimes apparently.

When she isn't up and about in the apartment when he emerges from his room in the morning, he has a feeling that something's wrong and knocks on her door.

When there's no answer, he looks in and sees her still lying on her bed and when he steps nearer it's obvious that she isn't alive.

He phones for an ambulance and while he waits for it he smokes the first cigarette that he's smoked inside the apartment for years.

The funeral is in the town cemetery, not far from where they live.

It's May. The chestnut trees are in flower.

A few of his mother's old friends are there.

When it's over he sits on a bench. The dry petals of chestnut flowers fall onto the path. They move on the asphalt with a papery sound, and when the wind stops they lie still. He watches them for a while. Then he stands up and walks back to the apartment. After that he lives alone.

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About the Author

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David Szalay is the author of *Turbulence, London and the South-East*, and *All That Man Is*. He's been awarded the Gordon Burn Prize and the *Paris Review*'s Plimpton Prize for Fiction and has been shortlisted for the Booker Prize. Born in Canada, he grew up in London, and now lives in Vienna.

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